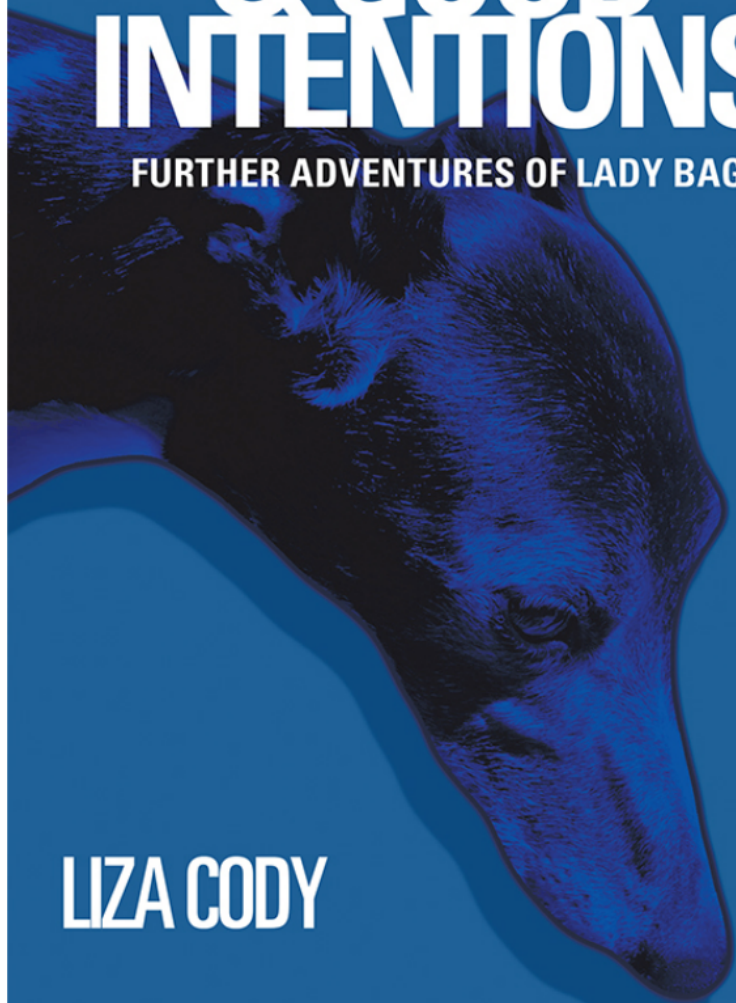


CROCODILES & GOOD INTENTIONS

FURTHER ADVENTURES OF LADY BAG

LIZA CODY



How do you evaluate books when you haven't seen published reviews? Well, here is a selection of reader's reviews for my last four books from US and UK Amazon. Nobody pays readers to post reviews – so thank you, readers!

LADY BAG

~~Absolutely~~ ~~great.~~
~~Kirsty Goddard~~ ~~has~~ ~~long~~ ~~been~~ ~~one~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~most~~ ~~original~~ ~~and~~ ~~creative~~ ~~writers~~ ~~in~~ ~~the~~ ~~mystery~~ ~~field.~~ ~~You'll~~ ~~like~~ ~~this~~ ~~book~~ ~~a~~ ~~lot.~~
~~One~~ ~~of~~ ~~her~~ ~~best.~~ ~~If~~ ~~there~~ ~~were~~ ~~a~~ ~~possible~~ ~~six~~ ~~stars~~ ~~–~~ ~~or~~ ~~even~~ ~~ten~~ ~~–~~ ~~I'd~~ ~~choose~~ ~~that~~ ~~in~~ ~~a~~ ~~minute...~~ ~~Nobody~~ ~~should~~ ~~miss~~ ~~this~~ ~~wonderful,~~ ~~thought-provoking,~~ ~~addictive~~ ~~book.~~
~~Virginia Appleton~~ ~~When~~ ~~you~~ ~~have~~ ~~anything~~ ~~else~~ ~~to~~ ~~do~~ ~~before~~ ~~you~~ ~~finish.~~
~~Kirsty Goddard~~ ~~on~~

MISS TERRY

~~Julie Garsbank!~~
~~Brilliant~~ ~~O'toole~~
~~Wendy~~ ~~Miss Terry~~ ~~is~~ ~~one~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~best~~ ~~books~~ ~~I~~ ~~have~~ ~~read~~ ~~in~~ ~~a~~ ~~long~~ ~~time...~~ ~~Wow!~~
~~Difficult~~ ~~thought-provoking~~ ~~mystery.~~

BALLAD OF A DEAD NOBODY

~~A~~ ~~chilling~~ ~~story~~ ~~very~~ ~~well~~ ~~told...~~
~~And~~ ~~her~~ ~~great~~ ~~Liza~~ ~~Cody~~
~~What~~ ~~a~~ ~~king~~ ~~writer!~~

GIMME MORE

~~Me~~ ~~is~~ ~~kind~~ ~~different~~
~~Like~~ ~~Gayle~~ ~~the~~ ~~best!~~
~~Also~~ ~~this~~ ~~book/Leading~~ ~~the~~ ~~field~~ ~~again~~ ~~(bought~~ ~~2~~ ~~copies~~ ~~–~~ ~~yay!)~~
~~The~~ ~~Life~~ ~~After~~ ~~Rock~~ ~~and~~ ~~Roll~~
~~The~~ ~~music~~ ~~of~~ ~~the~~ ~~seventies,~~ ~~born~~ ~~again~~ ~~rock~~ ~~chicks...~~

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BAD COMPANY
STALKER
HEADCASE
BACKHAND
UNDER CONTRACT

Bucket Nut Trilogy

BUCKET NUT
MONKEY WRENCH
MUSCLEBOUND

Other novels

RIFT
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Crocodiles & Good Intentions

FURTHER ADVENTURES OF LADY BAG

LIZA CODY



CROCODILES & GOOD INTENTIONS

FURTHER ADVENTURES OF LADY BAG

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Contents

- 1 A Guest Of Her Majesty
- 2 Release, Of A Sort
- 3 My Friends Are My Enemies
- 4 Keeping A Promise I Didn't Make
- 5 A Really Bad Idea
- 6 Half Woman, Half Penguin
- 7 Prayer Not Helping
- 8 Sweet Charity
- 9 Connor In Care
- 10 Emotional Blackmail
- 11 In Which I Save A Life
- 12 Complete Fuckupitude In A Garage Forecourt
- 13 Double Buggeration
- 14 A Nurse And A Screaming Baby
- 15 Waah!
- 16 Betrayal
- 17 Chaos In Suburbia
- 18 Pierre Joins The Legion Of Homeless
- 19 Raising The Dead
- 20 In Which I Find What I Want But Can't Have It
- 21 Negotiate
- 22 In Which Billy's Daughter And My Mother Make Surprise Visits
- 23 What Is Love?
- 24 What's Wrong With Us?
- 25 In Which Cashmere Triumphs Over Vagrancy
- 26 Accusations
- 27 More Accusations
- 28 In Which Li'l Missy Changes Sides
- 29 A Bad Morning For The Cops
- 30 Gimme Shelter
- 31 A Place Of Safety
- 32 Memory

33 Maybe It's People Power
34 Leaving Billy
35 Paranoia In Trafalgar Square
36 Going West
37 How It Ends
About The Author

CROCODILES AND GOOD INTENTIONS

FURTHER ADVENTURES OF LADY BAG

1

A Guest Of Her Majesty

The one thing you can say in favour of prison is that when you're inside the Health Service is obliged to treat you. Outside, doctors and dentists can choose their patients, and if you live on the street, ninety-nine times out of a hundred they won't choose you.

Of the many things you can say against prison, one is that the dentistry is crude.

They waited till I'd lost two stone through not being able to chew before they called in the dentist who chopped all the broken teeth out of my mouth. Then, because of years of neglect, he hauled a load of others out too. There's something illogical about treating a person who can't chew by removing her teeth. But no one listens to my kind of logic in prison. He said I'd thank him in the long run. I didn't.

I was given a set of false gnashers and, like my shoes, they weren't very comfortable. The medical warder said my mouth was as big as my feet and I was lucky they fit at all.

So now my teeth, like my shoes, are items that can be stolen if I don't watch out. Luckily they're made of plastic and have been in my mouth so I don't suppose there are many thieves who'd want them.

'Ange,' said Kerrilla Cropper, 'just shut up. You'll think yourself to death. People on this wing say you're a fruitcake and asking for a pounding. I can't, hand on heart, tell them they're wrong.'

There's a Hard Corps on every wing. Just because they're women doesn't mean they won't take advantage of being nastier than everyone else.

'Ride with the Devil,' I said, 'if you think it'll make your life easier.'

'And that's another thing...' Kerrilla doesn't feel comfortable when I talk about the Devil even though she goes to the chapel on Sundays. But she has to

clean these filthy bogs every damned day just like I do, whereas Satan's sidekicks get the cushy numbers like library, laundry and sickbay.

She's a big, big girl but she can't read or write. I help her fill in forms, which is why she tolerates me. But she won't bunk with me. She says I mutter in the night and talk crazy all day.

Other than that I take my medication and I'm no trouble at all, even though the Hard Corps members spit in my soup and then have the nerve to ask me to write their letters to the parole board. That's communal living for you. I put up with it because there's no alternative.

'My mum's got a visiting order,' Kerrilla told me, swishing bleach around a bowl with a brown-stained brush. 'She's bringing my Connor. I can't wait.' She looked anxious. She hadn't seen her son for six months.

'Will he recognise me?' she asked.

No he won't, I thought, because it's an everyday prison tragedy. I said, 'He'll recognise the love. He's too young for the Devil's grip.'

'Oh shut the fuck up,' she yelled and flicked bleach at me.

However much bleach we use we can't wipe out the grime. There are cracks in the porcelain, cracks in the plaster, and cracks in the floor, filled with the blood of thousands of lost souls.



Later, in the evening, after tea and before lockdown, I saw Kerrilla watching cartoons in the TV room and crying to herself.

'Oh Ange,' she said, snorting up snot and rubbing her eyes on sleeves already blackened by tears. 'It's hard for Mum to bring Connor all the way here. She said if he didn't want to come she couldn't make him. I'd been looking forward to seeing him so much. But Mum said I should of thought of that before I got myself in trouble. We ended up shouting at each other.'

'Wanting and wishing always bring disappointment,' I said, because that's the truth.

'Call yourself a friend?' she yelled and stormed away, sobbing.

'I don't actually,' I said to her back. 'I'm here and you're here. We occupy some of the same space at the same time, but that doesn't make a friendship.'

I have one true friend. She isn't human so I know I can rely on her through thick and thin, until death. She's called Electra. Pierre sent me a photo of her because he thought it'd make my lockup seem more like 'home'. He's a well-meaning fool who's never been in pokey. A senior member of the Hard Corps got her grubby fingers on it and said, 'Your dog looks more like dogfood than a dog. Bet your mate's starving it to death.'

I stabbed her face with a fork. There wasn't any damage because it was a plastic fork, but she let out such a howl that the screws came and dragged me away to solitary. It was fine. I like solitary. And it did my reputation some good. I was no longer just a zombie on medication. I was an unpredictable zombie and less likely to be picked on. I'd shown an aptitude for violence – something Satan's sidekicks understood.

But I got rid of the photo. It's safer not to keep so much as an image of valuables in here because even images can be stolen or dirtied.

The next morning, after beans on toast soggy enough for me to chew, Kerrilla and I met over the bleach and brushes. She said, 'Your release date's coming up, Ange. Go and see them for me. My mum's boyfriend doesn't like black babies and I think he's going to make her dump my Connor on the social workers.'

'Your own mum?' But I wasn't surprised – mums don't always have your best interest at heart. Everyone thinks they're supposed to, but they're human and the Devil's worm eats their apples too.

'She'd do anything for that poxy piece of crap,' she said, confirming all my worst expectations about women and love. She went on, 'They're going to send you back to London soon. What can I do, sat here in Birmingham?'

'What about the dad?'

'He'd only give Connor to *his* mum. She's prob'ly got a boyfriend who doesn't like white babies. Besides they're all in gangs.'

'Maybe he'd be best off...'

'Don't say it, Ange,' Kerrilla shrieked. 'Just don't. A baby needs his family.' This, of course is the same family who brought her up illiterate, ignorant and so abused she went with the first boy she met who was too stoned to care what she looked like. The Hard Corps on this wing call her 'Gorilla Crapper' and think themselves witty.

She tore off her shirt and stuffed it down the bowl with the brush. In the next cubicle she forced her sweat pants round the bend. Then her underwear, then her shoes, then the mop heads and cleaning cloths. She ran up and down, cold and wobbly, flushing, flushing and flushing till the floor was flooded.

'Go for it Kerri,' I muttered, and stood by watching. She was expressing her hatred of herself and her situation. Better out than in, I say, even though they will punish this one glorious spasm of rage and independence by making her even more powerless. Sure enough, three screws dragged her away to solitary.

'Why didn't you stop her?' PO Brownlee asked, staring at the flooded bogs.

'The Devil was tearing her in his claws,' I said. 'Circumstances beyond my control...'

'Oh for fuck's sake, why do I even bother asking? Just get this mess

cleaned up.'

After lunch they sent me down to the dispensary and I waited in line for the pills that relieve me of the pleasure and pain of living. If the point of life is to breed, to laugh and to suffer, then my life is pointless, far more pointless than Kerrilla's.

When it was my turn the medic looked at my notes and said, 'We should begin cutting down.'

I leaned my fists on his desk and said, 'Start with my feet. Cut those down and it'll be easier to find shoes to fit. Chop a bit off the heels and a bit off the toes. It'll be bloody at first but I'll be more like Cinderella. It's not my fault – my mother didn't bind my feet at birth. Of course she found other ways of hobbling me, so that when I met my Charming Prince of Darkness I couldn't run from him. I could only dance with him. Unhappily ever after.'

'Oh for fuck's sake,' the medic said, and gave me the full dose. He's new, but he'll learn.

Three days later they transferred me back to London. Kerrilla was still in solitary so I didn't have a chance to say goodbye and she couldn't tell me where her mother lived. I was off the hook. Who but a pitiful lump of ignorance like her would ask a catastrophe like me for help with her family problems? I'd laugh, except my teeth might fall out.



Back at HMP Holloway in London my solicitor, Ms Kaylee Yost, came to see me. She said, 'We're looking at a release date some time next week if we're lucky and you can keep out of trouble. I'll have to negotiate some sort of supervision order but basically, your time's up. How do you feel?'

Because of the pills I didn't feel much of anything but I knew Electra was waiting for me. Once I saw her and had a little slurp of red wine I'd begin to feel more normal.

As if she could hear my thoughts, Ms Yost said, 'Of course the first thing you'll have to do is see your AA sponsor and a probation officer. You're off the alcohol now and you'll find your life much safer and healthier if you can remain that way.' She looked so pleased with me and so full of hope that I didn't have the heart to say, 'Fat chance. What's the point of being free if you can't go to hell in your own handbasket?'

'Will Pierre come to meet me?' I asked. Ms Yost still thought he was my AA sponsor. For a lawyer she was very gullible. Of course she was just a baby lawyer and I had been her first client so I thought I should let her down gently and not disillusion her straight away about absolutely everything.

‘He’s a lovely man. He says he’ll be outside waiting.’

‘With Electra?’

‘And your sister.’

‘Oh goody,’ I said.

The person Ms Yost calls my sister is not anyone’s sister, nor is he related to me. He thinks he’s a girl but he still has to shave every now and then. That’s another secret I keep from my solicitor who is a straight-forward woman and easily confused. If, as an officer of the court, she knew I was being released into the care of one drag artist, one transsexual and a dog, who was probably the most sensible one of the trio, she might have had second thoughts about being so helpful. And hopeful.



At association time, I went to my lockup. I don’t associate very well and I wanted to suck on Ms Yost’s gift of a white chocolate bar without interruption or having to share. I’d only just torn the wrapper off when I sensed a presence lurking close to my door. I looked up and saw a small ginger weasel hovering.

‘What?’

‘Don’t you shout at me,’ she said, sliding in and standing with her back to the wall as if she’d been kicked in the bum once too often. ‘I’m just transferred in from Birmingham and Kerrilla Cropper asked me to look you up.’

‘Who?’

‘Gorilla Crapper – don’t pretend you’ve forgotten. I was on the punishment corridor with her and when we got out she gave me half her tobacco allowance if I promised I’d talk to you, even if you’re barking barmy and live in a cardboard box.’

Half a tobacco allowance is very, very expensive for someone who smokes like a scout’s campfire the way Kerri does.

I said, ‘So?’

‘So I’ve written out her mum’s name and address and you’ve got to see her the way you promised.’

‘I never!’

‘Take it,’ she said, shoving the grubby corner of an envelope into my hand, ‘and shut up shouting.’

2

Release, Of A Sort

At last the time came when the medic gave me a couple of days' worth of pills, the sub-assistant governor gave me the seventy-three quid I'd earned cleaning toilets and they sent me out for public consumption once more.

I was as grey and sober as the morning, and I remembered the last time I heard that door slam behind me, years ago, when I had no friends or relations, no job and only the address of a hostel in Southwark to go to. Back then I thought I'd be able to claw my way back to a proper respectable life. Now I know I can't, and that relieves some of the pressure.

But as if to deny me the comfort of low-to-no expectations, the first person I saw when I hit the street was Ms Kaylee Yost with a plastic folder full of instructions and helpful suggestions about how I could retrain to be a sober productive citizen. To a person as determined as I was to celebrate freedom with a bottle of red wine, this could only be described as a bummer.

Then I saw Electra trotting towards me, her fur as beautifully marked as a tabby cat's, her ears pricked and her tail waving, 'Hello, how are you, where've you been?' Of course she didn't actually say that out loud – I need more than one glass of red before she lets me hear her – but her citrine eyes shone with welcome. I dropped my carrier bag and held out my arms.

There is life after prison, and here she was, with her forepaws on my shoulders and her sleek head tucked under my chin.

Then I saw my 'sister', my mister-sister, clickety-clacking towards me in kitten heels, grass-green tights and a scarlet fun fur coat. 'I might of known I'd come second to a dog,' he breathed tremulously.

'Well she is a greyhound,' I said before he wrapped me in fun-furry perfumed arms. I've got to say I prefer dog fur and dog perfume, but given an audience, Smister can't resist a girly display.

‘I missed you so-o much, but Pierre and Cherry looked after me and I looked after Electra. I made her a cashmere knitted jersey for the cold weather but Pierre wouldn’t let me put it on her today. He said you’d kill me.’

‘She looked like a bridesmaid at a really flaky wedding,’ Pierre said, arriving soon afterwards.

‘She looked gorgeous,’ Smister protested.

‘I swear, if a dog could blush...’

I said, ‘Who’s Cherry?’

‘Shall we try and find a café?’ Ms Yost put in quickly, ‘for a celebratory cup of something hot?’

‘What about a pub?’ I asked.

Ms Yost looked warningly at Pierre. He collected himself and said, ‘Now Angela, you know that isn’t going to happen on my watch.’ Pomposity really didn’t suit him, but it made Smister giggle.

I ground my teeth. This wasn’t freedom at all. This was social control. I might as well have stayed in chokey.

I said, ‘Well anyway, I’ve got to go to Shoreditch to do a favour for a friend so I really don’t have time for celebrating.’

‘What friend?’ Smister said. ‘You don’t have any friends.’

‘Bonds are forged in adversity,’ I said. Smister seemed to have forgotten that he and I were friends. Pierre wasn’t the only one who could be pompous.

‘Now, girls,’ Pierre said, ‘don’t start. You haven’t seen each other for months. Let’s do as Kaylee suggests and find a cuppa caffeine. I’m sure she doesn’t have all day.’

So we had an uncomfortable half hour pretending that Smister was a girl, that Pierre was my AA sponsor and that I wasn’t gagging for alcohol.

Kaylee Yost said, ‘You look so much healthier.’ By which she meant cleaner.

Pierre said, ‘The whites of your eyes are actually white.’

‘I like the teeth,’ Smister said.

I nearly took them out and threw them at him.

Electra said nothing, bless her. She leaned against my chair and rested her head on my knee while I fed her bits of my sticky bun under the table.

In prison I don’t have to pretend to be sociable. Nobody expects me to appreciate them or be grateful for stuff I never asked them to do in the first place. But I mumbled my thanks to Ms Yost for finding me a probation officer out in the bleak wasteland of North-by-Northwest Finchley because it was close-ish to Pierre who was supposedly supervising me. And, I might add, as far as it could be from the West End, my preferred place of non-residence.

The Devil takes a well-meaning moron like Kaylee Yost and shoves her like

a stone into my shoe. He makes sure that I can't walk freely and that she, poor lamb, will have all her ideals crushed under my calloused and cynical foot. Two birds – one stone. What a clever bugger he is. All the little steps along the hard road that brought me to this café with these three mismatched people began with him. I was in the clanker because I did his bidding. The one pure act I made of my own free will was choosing Electra. She is the only true innocent in my story.

Kaylee left eventually, but only after forcing me to use her phone to make an appointment with a probation officer called Howard Piper. She was determined to put me on the straight and narrow path – the one she treads daily and finds so easy to follow.

Pierre said, 'Don't put her down. She's always gone the extra mile for you.'

'But she's so boring,' Smister complained. 'That suit's pure polyester.'

'Why don't you give her a makeover,' I suggested.

'She doesn't even know she needs one. Speaking of which – what do you think of these?' He unzipped his coat and exhibited a tight sweater which showed off a swelling bosom that looked completely natural.

'Oh you haven't,' I cried.

'Had the augmentation? No, stupid. But I've been seeing the sweetest little endocrinologist. He's a total genius with hormones. Pierre's so-o jealous.'

Pierre sighed flatly. 'You still don't get me, do you? I'm a guy. I don't want the tits, except on Cherry. I'm an illusionist. That's something else.' He was a motor mechanic, bald as an ostrich egg, with arms like knotted oak, who was nevertheless the most popular Diana Ross on the North London Drag Circuit. It was a comfort to me that he and Smister didn't understand each other, because I was flummoxed by both of them.

'Why am I still here,' I asked, 'listening to you two, when I'm free to do what I like for a change?' I stood up.

'Hold on,' Pierre said. 'I lied to the cops for you. Fuck knows why, except I can't stand to see a grown tranny cry. Fact, you're not going to swan off and get roaring high on your first night out of the joint. Cherry would worry.'

'Pierre and me, we've done up the ambulance for you and Electra,' Smister said. 'It's behind Cherry's house and it's the address you need. You can't not have an address any more.'

'Who's Cherry?' I asked again.



The Ambo looked like a Pretty Princess bed-sitting room except there was no princess and nowhere to sit but the bed. There was even a cute pink bunny

on the pillow for me to cuddle if I got lonely. I could feel the vomit rising in the back of my throat. There were tears rising in the back of my eyes too; perhaps Smister did care in his own excruciating way.

Electra drank water from her personalised pink bowl before stretching out in a soft bed of her own. She looked utterly content. The Ambo smelled of lemon-scented cleaner, air freshener and the chemical toilet. It reminded me of chokey and cleaning bogs. I wanted to smell London air, slow traffic, fast food, free people and dogs.

I lay on the bunk and asked Electra to come and lie beside me. Then I buried my nose in her neck and went to sleep. At least that was a freedom I could indulge in – sleeping to the hum of real life without the constant jolt of slamming doors.

I dreamed a lonely dream of a chalk path that stretched for miles across rolling hills. Electra ran on ahead until she was a dot on the empty horizon. That was all, but it seemed to go on forever.

I had supper that night in Cherry's house. She'd made a bland chilli which we ate American style with crackers instead of rice. Afterwards we had brownies and drank weak coffee.

She spoke cooingly to Pierre, bantered with Smister and petted Electra, and she was polite to me. Sadly, there was no wine or even weak beer with the meal, and when I excused myself to go to the loo there was nothing intoxicating in the medicine cabinet, no interesting bottles in the fridge or any of the kitchen cupboards. Cherry's house was as dry as dinosaur bone.

But the remedy was in my own pocket. 'I'm going to the pub,' I said, when I got back from my search of Cherry's house. I felt in my pocket for the seventy-three pounds I'd earned in the can. It was gone. *All* of it.

I roared.

Pierre, Smister and Cherry sat stone still. They looked shocked but not surprised. Electra flattened herself under the coffee table.

My boiling, rageous stare settled on sticky-fingered Smister.

'Don't look at me,' he said. 'It wasn't my idea.'

'Give it back.' I stood over him, furious. 'Do you have any idea what I had to do to get it? Do you?'

'Stop shouting.' Cherry leaped up. 'Pierre and me, we lied for you. So don't make us look bad. And please don't shout in my sitting room either. You're scaring Electra.'

Pierre was looking as untroubled as Buddha. He said, 'Have you taken your medication?'

'Yes,' I shouted. But of course I hadn't. I'd thought I could endure the meal and the company and then reward myself at the nearest pub. After a few jars of

the red stuff everything would've been all right. I wouldn't need the chemical fog any more. Electra would talk to me again and I'd be free.

'You haven't, have you?' He looked straight into my eyes.

'Pants on fire,' said Smister.

I made for the door. 'A fine homecoming this turned out to be!' I would've stormed out righteously except that Electra wouldn't storm with me. She stayed under the coffee table looking sorrowful.

'Homecoming?' Smister jeered. 'You wouldn't have a home except I donated the Ambo.'

'What did you need the Ambo for anyway?' Cherry asked him. 'You've been living in my spare room since she's been... away.'

Pierre yawned and said, 'Go take your pills, Momster. Chill. Get some Zs.'

My out of body experience:

Suddenly I was hanging from the ceiling in the corner of the room above the TV. I was upside-down like a bat, looking at Smister, Cherry, Pierre and Electra as if they were four faces of Woman. Smister, a boy, aka Little Missy, who knew beyond reason that he was a girl, and who looked more girly than Cherry – a real woman. Pierre who used the womanly art of illusion to convince everyone that he was a diva and more glamorous than any real woman, while at the same time claiming the privilege of being a real man. Cherry, a woman so real that she was unthreatened by these encroachments on her territory. Electra, the faithful, trustworthy, caring face of femaleness. And me? Well I wasn't there at all. I was the Invisible Woman in the tableau. With my big feet and plastic teeth, my scarred face, and my tragic lack of juice – did I even count as a woman at all?

Smister helped me to my feet. Electra whined and licked my hand. Pierre said, 'You can't suddenly stop taking the medication you've been on for months. Tomorrow, after you've seen the probation officer I'll take you to Cherry's GP and get you fixed up with a prescription and a programme for cutting down.'

'Anyone'd think he was a real AA sponsor,' Smister grumbled as he and Pierre supported me to the back door.

Cherry held Electra's collar, keeping her in the house.

I lay down alone on the bunk bed in the Ambo feeling even more abandoned than I ever had in chokey.

3

My Friends Are My Enemies

Howard Piper was one of those phoney probation officers in a black down-wit-da-kids hooded sweat. He barely looked up from his files – a woman my age didn't register on his screen. It was one of those times when being Invisible Woman was a blessing. He wouldn't give me any help, but he wouldn't give me any grief either.

The doctor was different. He wanted to show how kindly and caring he could be to one of life's rejects. He accepted Pierre's word without question and handed my prescriptions to him instead of to me. Over my head, he discussed with Pierre drug dependency and its effects on alcoholism. He included me every now and then with a kindly paternal smile. I obliged by sitting in mulish silence, zoning out and playing with Electra's ears.

Afterwards I stomped off in a huff without saying thanks or goodbye. Pierre caught up and forced me to wait in the pharmacy till the prescriptions were filled and then made me take my pills right there under the pharmacist's cruel eye as if I were just another methadone addict.

I used to like Pierre. Not any more. Sometime, somewhere, Satan had whispered into his neat black ear. The words travelled through his brain and infected his heart. Now he is an agent of the Corrupter but he doesn't know it. He thinks he's kindness on legs. He took the morning off work to 'help me out' and he bought me a lunch of fish and chips and hot sweet tea. He kept my medications safe in his pocket because he suspected I'd sell them to buy drink.

I'd been out of chokey for twenty-four whole hours and not yet tasted freedom or a sip of the red. Clearly the Lord of Vile Worms was turning all my friends against me. Everyone was conspiring to make me into a sober, respectable, clean and tidy citizen.

But you have to work at respectability every day of your life. You can't get

drunk, or fart in public. Your socks should match, your finger nails should be grime-free and you should be able to invite strangers home for tea and cake. But what's the point? I don't want cake, clean fingernails, an address or friends because as soon as I begin to get used to them the Devil snatches them away. He can't find me if Electra and I keep moving and live out of range of doctors, lawyers, and probation officers.

Out of sight and out of my mind, if I own nothing, nothing can be snatched, and if I have no home I can't be evicted.

That evening Cherry went out to an evening class entitled, 'Design Your Own Handbag'. Pierre, Smister and I ate pizza. While the two of them were in the kitchen arguing about who should take out the rubbish I stole ten quid from Smister's purse and, with Electra by my side, crept out through the front door.

We wandered the night streets alone and felt the cold damp of winter on our eyelids and earlobes. We smelled the plumes of unleaded pollution from the North Circular Road and saw the accumulated grime from years of traffic on the windows of failed shop fronts. Roaming gangs of youths ate slimy kebabs and forced us into doorways or gutters while they passed. It wasn't malice. They were so up their own arses with their phones and their iPads that they simply didn't see us. They were the peers of the pavement. Their wealth and status were invested in the shiny technology they held in their hands so they forgot they were powerless, neglected and rejected. Just like me.

We found an off-licence lurking behind steel shutters. Inside, the shop assistant and the booze cowered in a cage of bulletproof glass. I posted my money through a slit and the assistant put a two litre bottle and my change in a bin for me to collect. It was a miserable suspicious exchange but I didn't care. Freedom was mine, and now the answer to all my problems was in my own hands – a heavy plastic bottle of red comfort.

Electra's ears were pinned flat against her narrow skull. She shivered with cold and anxiety. I said, 'Don't look at me like that. I don't know what you're complaining about – or are you too good for me now? Have you conveniently forgotten how close you were to being put down when I rescued you?' She whined and pressed against my legs.

We left the off-licence and turned back towards the Ambo and Cherry's house. But I couldn't wait. I unscrewed the bottle top while we walked and stuck the neck between my lips. I took a long deep swallow – my first for so many painfully dry months. My throat opened to receive the cure for all that ailed me and I could feel the barbed wire that was tightly wound around my head loosening even before the wine hit my stomach.

I experienced seven minutes of pure joy. The load of tension and

resentment slipped off my shoulders, I no longer felt the cold. The empty hole in my chest healed. My head felt light and airy.

‘Electra,’ I said, ‘how can anything that feels this good be bad for me?’

‘I never said it was bad for you,’ she replied sadly, ‘I said it was bad for me. You’ll forget your way home and we’ll end up in a doorway somewhere without even a blanket to share.’

‘Cobblers! We’re going home now.’ But I stopped. Without warning, pain grasped the base of my skull in an iron fist and squeezed. As if I’d been sucking lemons, all the salivary glands under my tongue went into production. Sweat poured down my face. Then I threw up. Pizza and half a litre of red wine tumbled out of my mouth onto the pavement. Even after it was empty my stomach convulsed and heaved.

I staggered away from the mess. My head, my guts and my throat were in spasm.

‘What?’ Electra asked.

‘Poison,’ I retched. ‘Your good friends Pierre and Smister fed me bad pizza.’

She backed away, disgusted. ‘Are you sure it wasn’t the wine? You aren’t used to it anymore.’

‘It’s the pizza!’

‘Okay, don’t shout.’ She stood a few paces away from me wrinkling her fine slender nose. ‘Only come along. Quickly. You don’t want to end up back in the slam for D and D.’

‘I’m not drunk,’ I moaned, ‘more’s the pity. And how can I be disorderly when I can’t even stand up straight?’

‘You’ll find a way.’ She turned and walked down the dreary dark tunnel of night, leading me away from shame towards blame.

My head slammed like Holloway doors, blinding me, but I followed the clicking of her high heels on the filthy pavement, hugging my plastic bottle of wine and warmth.



The next morning I woke in a heap on the Ambo floor. My head was twice its normal size and banging like a piston engine. Electra was sleeping on the bed.

‘Momster,’ Little Missy Smister called from outside, ‘are you up?’ His voice was a hatchet that sliced through my nerves.

‘Go away,’ I moaned, and the effort of speaking made my guts writhe.

He hauled the back doors open and stood looking at me while my eyeballs sizzled and fried in the daylight.

‘That’s a hangover and a half,’ he said flatly. ‘Do you know how revolting you look?’

Electra stretched languorously and jumped over my dead body to greet him.

‘Wait till I tell Pierre. He’ll go ape.’

‘Go away – I’m dying.’

Electra wandered away for her morning pee.

‘Pierre will be so-o disappointed.’ Smister was enjoying his own disapproval. ‘He thought you’d changed, poor sap.’

‘He should’ve checked with me first, shouldn’t he?’ I covered my eyes with my forearm.

Smister wouldn’t leave me alone. He thrust a bottle of water at me. ‘Drink this, all of it. You’ve got to take your pills too. And I can’t leave that bottle of wine with you. Pierre’d have my guts for garters and my garters for a noose.’

I drank some of his water and took the hated pills out of his manicured paw. He made me open my mouth so he could check I’d swallowed them. I might as well have been back in the choke.

‘Get up,’ he said bossily. ‘Have a proper wash and put on clean clothes. You whiff of sick and armpits. You can’t come to the house till after lunch. I’ve got a client.’ And off he sashayed with my bottle of mercy under his arm like this derelict corner of an uncaring universe was his own private dance floor.

‘I hate you with a blazing passion,’ I said flopping onto the bunk which smelled so comfortably of Electra that I went to sleep almost immediately.

When I woke up I’d realised what had happened. The Devil had taken my friends and turned them into my enemies. He’d tied knots in Pierre and Smister’s good intentions until somehow, in the tangle, the good transmogrified into bad. As it does when people think they’re on the side of the angels.



I had a wash and dressed in my older, cleaner clothes. I left the vommy ones on the floor of the Ambo. I found my old backpack in the cupboard under the bunk and packed up everything useful, including dogfood and a tin opener. Beggars can’t be choosers, and that’s what I am when all’s said and done: I’m a beggar. I exist only because of the kindness of strangers. Satan has a devil of a job fouling transient kindness.

Then I closed the doors, hid the key in the exhaust pipe and walked away without looking back. Electra fell into step beside me and I stroked her ears. ‘We’ve done it before,’ I reassured her. ‘We can do it again. All we need is each

other.'

I didn't walk all the way to the West End. Are you mad? Just out of holiday camp, with a headache the size of the Albert Hall? I don't have super powers. I used what was left of Smister's tenner and took a train. And in case you're worrying about Smister – don't. He stole my seventy-three pounds. I only stole ten. He's way ahead. He's always way ahead.

I left the underground at Piccadilly Circus breathless, shaking and bewildered by the stench of so many bodies. I felt as if I'd been away for years and in my absence the population had expanded by 99 percent. Standing under cold grey Eros was like being at the hub of a racing, shrieking wheel. I was buffeted by the slipstream and had to sit on the steps to find myself in the chaos.

I told myself this was what I'd longed for in prison. This chaos was my freedom. I was just another leaf clinging to a twig on a huge tree in a gale. No one can mark out a single leaf for malign attention, can they?

'Chaos is my friend,' I whispered to Electra. She leaned against my shoulder. I went on, 'There's nothing to freak about and everything to be grateful for. I just need to get used to it again.'

'Well, bugger I, if it isn't Lady Bag!' said a thick smelly voice from behind me. 'She talks to her dog cos no one in his right mind would be seen dead talking to her.'

I turned. It was Scots Gary and his sidekick, Sick Hazel. Her face was as grey and pitted as a pumice stone. She said, 'I heard you died in lockup.' She coughed and wheezed. Her ankles were mauve and swollen.

'Heard wrong. I heard you gave up smoking.'

'Heard wrong.' Her laugh began and ended as a retching wracking cough.

Scots Gary said, 'We should celebrate – yer alive an' she's still dying. Ye got some dosh for a dram?'

I had only about sixty pence left so I was forced to drink what they were drinking, which was industrial strength cider.

This time a couple of mouthfuls was all it took but, just like the night before, with the shock of a train wreck, my head and guts exploded.

'Good god a'mighty!' Gary said. 'Wha's all that about, eh?'

Fortunately I hadn't eaten anything since the last time so although I felt just as terrible there wasn't half so much mess.

'What's your medication?' Sick Hazel asked with clinical interest, staring at me while I doubled over. 'Have they given you something to stop you drinking?'

'No,' I gasped.

'Remember your mate, Wee Craigie?' she said to Gary. 'They made him

take Antabuse and he kept thinking he could beat it?’

‘Oh aye, poor old bugger.’

‘Antabuse?’ I wiped my mouth and running nose on my sleeve.

‘It’s that stuff they give you to make you barf if you drink. They’re not supposed to unless you consent. But I bet a million pounds Wee Craigie didn’t consent, eh Gary?’

‘Not our Craigie, no way.’

‘See?’ Sick Hazel said, coughing smugly. ‘They’ll have started you on it before you left the slam and it’ll be all mixed up in your prescriptions. Let’s have a dekkko at them, I’ll soon tell you.’

‘I haven’t got them,’ I mumbled, my head in my hands. ‘Pierre’s got them.’

‘There you go then – this Pierre of yours is dosing you.’

‘He wouldn’t,’ I protested, my guts sore from dry heaving.

But I thought about the changes in Pierre. He used to stroll on the wild side. But since I last saw him he’d become, oh crap, respectable. Maybe it was because he was living in a conventional beige house with a conventional white bread woman. Maybe Satan and Cherry had persuaded him that he was being cruel to be kind, whereas in fact he was just being cruel without my consent. He was abusing me with Antabuse and Satan was laughing his head off.

‘How long does it take to wear off?’ I asked through a mouthful of corrosion.

‘When did you take the last one?’

I tried to remember how many pills Smister shoved down my throat. I thought it might’ve been four. ‘This morning.’

‘Ye mightn’t want to touch a drop fer a coupla days.’ Gary said. ‘Wee Craigie was sick fer months, right up until the day he kicked the bucket. Ask me, it was them pills killed him.’

‘Don’t scare her,’ Sick Hazel said with a delicious shudder.

We shuffled away from my mess. They were going to Cambridge Circus. Obviously we had to part company. They would be scoring and drinking all day whereas my life was wrecked for the foreseeable future.

I went to my favourite place in the world – Trafalgar Square. My headache was blinding me so I sat on the National Gallery steps till it calmed down a bit. Then I sat some more because I was afraid that if I moved it might wake up again. It began to rain. Electra crept close and I sheltered her under my jacket. She knows when I’m ill or in pain and will always share her warmth. Right now I felt so sick I wanted to lie down and die. It was like the biggest, the worst hangover in the world multiplied by 3.7 billion and I hadn’t had any fun to deserve it.

‘Fuck off, you Master of Maggots,’ I said to the Devil. ‘Find some other way

to get at me. Use your imagination for a change.'

Of course I'd heard about Antabuse, but I never thought anyone would try it on me. Certainly not Pierre. Not him.

But sitting there in the cold rain, clenched like a fist with nausea and anger, I found myself remembering the last time I saw my father. Now why on earth would my poor clapped out old mind throw that pissy memory into my hammering head?

I was eight years-old and I'd come back home from school early with an earache. I opened the front door, and saw my dad coming downstairs carrying a very heavy suitcase. It was banging against the wall and I knew my mother would go ape about the paintwork. He stopped. And I stood with the front door still open and my key in my hand. My mother made me wear it on a ribbon round my neck because she said I was so careless I'd lose it. But the girls in the gym changing-room teased me so I always took it off before I got to school. Usually I remembered to put it back round my neck before I arrived home, but here I was at the front door with the ribbon in my hand. And my father saw me. He was always on my mother's side. Never on mine. Not once in my life did he protect me against her.

He looked at me. He scowled. At the time, so many years ago, I thought the expression on his face was angry. Today, in Trafalgar Square, I wondered if it was fearful.

He said, 'Don't tell your mother.' He continued down the stairs, bumping the suitcase on the steps and the wall. He picked up his coat from its usual peg. He sidled past me, where I stood frozen to the spot at the open door. The suitcase cracked me on the knee and I said, 'Ow!' But he didn't even look at me. Nothing. He just walked away.

I was afraid to tell my mother because of the key. In fact I hid what had just happened behind the earache and by the time she came home I was crying with the pain of it. Even now an unpleasant, sharp ringing in my ears joined forces with the headache. I knew that I'd been afraid of the wrong thing. Is that where it all began – this gift I have for getting everything wrong? Or was I born damaged as my mother so often told me?

My mouth was as foul and dry as a camel's arse. I staggered down to the fountain, cupped my hands and drank. Electra drank beside me.

'Oh for the love of Mike!' said an elderly man in a pale tan raincoat. 'Don't do that. It isn't healthy. Here, take a coupla bucks and buy yourself a bottle of clean water.' He held out a twenty pound note.

'That's twenty pounds,' I said, suddenly feeling too weak and emotional to fleece a sweet-natured tourist. 'It's a lot of money.'

'Not to me.' He stooped to stroke Electra's head and she smiled graciously

up at him. 'Nice pooch,' he said and tottered away across the square towards Admiralty Arch.

I stuffed the twenty into an inside pocket before anyone could rob me of it. Then I searched in more pockets for a tissue to blow my nose on because I was feeling weepy. That's where I found the torn corner of an envelope with Gorilla Crapper's address scrawled on it.

4

Keeping A Promise I Didn't Make

I went to Shoreditch because there was no point sitting around the West End collecting dosh for booze. In the West End I risked running into someone I knew who'd offer me a drink, and I didn't think I was strong enough to say no, even though I knew it would make me hurl my tripes on the floor. That's the tragic truth – I was still aching for a bottle of red, really aching.

Let me tell you something else: I had a lot of time at Charing Cross Station finding someone to change my twenty pound note into a ten and two fives. And then to find someone prepared to accept my ten in return for using their credit card to buy me a travel card.

I was fuming and almost weeping by the time I got on the train. This so-called 'cashless society' completely excludes the poor and homeless who don't have bank accounts or credit cards. We're the unseen, nonexistent poor.

As if to rub in the insulting truth that only the enfranchised classes are worth bothering about, Shoreditch was much more gentrified than I'd expected. It's not a part of London I know, but just the name triggered thoughts of the Ripper and Dickensian slums, not wine bars and design consultants.

Knowing that Kerrilla didn't come from French patisserie territory, Electra and I trudged gloomily into an area of poorer housing. When we found ourselves in a street of broken bottles, kebab shops and overflowing bags of rubbish we knew we were getting close. I asked the way from a fourteen-year-old pushing a coughing baby in a buggy. She pointed to a block of mildewed concrete and cracked glass.

'No surprises here,' I told Electra. 'You know what, if I work really hard and stay sober long enough to get on a housing list, I might, if I'm lucky, be housed somewhere like this.' I even laughed miserably, because once, years

ago, I tried to do just that. But I had the satisfaction of knowing that I'd failed to reach even the normal standards of failure in this great city.

The stairwell was a trash chute of broken toys, infested bedding, cans, bottles, condoms and syringes. At the third floor we found an emaciated girl rolling a cigarette. She was wearing a micro skirt and her legs were blue with cold. She sneered at us as we sidled past onto the outside walkway where the wind hit us full in the face.

Number C23's door had boot marks on it. The glass panel at the top had been replaced by cardboard and parcel tape. I knocked. Nothing happened. I knocked again and got more of the same. Electra yawned, so I sat down with my back to the door where we were partially protected from the wind.

It had been a traumatic day so far and we'd come a long way. We went to sleep and I dreamed of a warehouse full of empty bottles. I had to carry Electra because she had cut her feet on broken glass. She said, 'Full of empty – how very like you. Just help me over the hump.'

I woke up to find a Punjabi woman trying to shove a push-chair over my legs. Her friend, a big woman in purple suedette boots, said, 'Move your arse. Who d'you think you are, passed out on our floor?'

'I'm waiting for Mrs Cropper.' I scrambled out of the way.

'Her? Fat chance. If she isn't down the boozier...'

'Come on,' the Punjabi woman said, and they left us sitting where a door mat would've been if anyone inside was interested in clean shoes. I got to my feet and banged on the door again. Nothing was what I expected, and nothing was what I got until, just as I was about to leave, I heard a child crying. It was a weary, hopeless cry, and I was suddenly overwhelmed by acute sadness. Within a few seconds the unguarded fragment of what had once been my heart twitched awake and felt my father's desertion, my mother's bitter disappointment in me, my brother's anger, my lover's treachery, and my own desolation when I realised I had loved and still loved the Devil. There was an endless parade of uneaten meals, of drinks undrunk, targets missed, children unborn – and oh, those famished nights.

Cursing my Lazarus heart, I stooped and squinted through the letterbox.

A naked child stood on newspapers in a filthy hall. I could count his ribs but I couldn't count his bruises. His ancient infant eyes met mine without a flicker of hope or expectation but he kept up his low dreary wail.

I stood up abruptly and almost fainted. My headache smashed my skull. I looked at Electra. Even an elderly greyhound, a beggar's dog, had more flesh on her bones than Kerrilla's son, Connor. Electra looked back at me and I could tell by her sweet expression that she knew I would feed her before nightfall. Connor had no expectations at all.

I beat on the neighbour's door, and when that failed I tried the next one. Eventually a door was opened by a fat man in a string vest.

I said, 'Sorry to bother you, but can I borrow your phone? There's a child is trouble four doors down.'

The man didn't bother to answer. He turned his back on me and yelled, 'Sally!' before going back to his screaming TV programme.

His stick-thin wife said, 'Oh, the Cropper kid. I sometimes post a pizza slice through the letterbox when they're out – if there's any left.' She jerked her thumb in the direction of her fat mate. 'I do what I can and don't you tell nobody any different. As for my phone – fuck off. If she gets to hear I've stuck my neb in she'll rip it off.' She shut the door.

I made for the stairwell, but my way down was blocked by the blue-legged girl having sex with a balding, white-haired man. She gripped his shoulder with one hand to keep herself from falling while the other hand held a sachet of something that didn't look like sugar. It wasn't a long wait, and he walked away downstairs, zipping up his fly as if he'd been having a piss. While she was bending to pick up a dirty tissue I stepped up to her and snatched the sachet out of her hand.

'Oy!' she shrieked through a tangle of greasy hair.

'Gimme your phone.'

'You fucking slag.' She made a grab for her stuff. I popped it into my bra. She went for my eyes. I kneed her in the guts. She was thin as a toast rack and had no stamina whatsoever. She sat down and started to cry. It was the same hopeless weary wail I'd heard from Connor.

I said, 'Lend me your phone.' Whatever they don't have, girls in her line of work always own phones. She dug in her jacket pocket and pulled out a smart little phone. I squinted at it.

'Turn it on.'

'It is on. You blind?' But she opened it up and handed it to me, watching my bosom like a buzzard watches a bunny.

I thumbed 999. 'Police and ambulance,' I said when my call was answered. 'My name is, er, Ariadne Baguette. I'm reporting the presence of a starving, abused child, name of Connor Cropper, at...' Just at this point the blue-legged girl launched herself at me – all sharp knees, elbows and fingernails. I managed to shout the address into the phone before she tore it out of my hand. I was really surprised she'd gone for the phone and not her rocks.

'You stupid fucking bitch,' she screamed, 'why don't you mind your own fucking business?'

'Don't you care a baby's going to die?' I yelled back at her.

'You din't have to use my phone,' she said. 'All you done is put me in the

shit. Now gimme my stuff back or I'll call me boyfriend and he'll sort you out good an' proper. He's got a dog, who'll eat your dog alive.'

'He'll have to catch her first,' I said. But I gave her back the little packet of ease and death. Electra whined. She didn't like threats and anger. And I don't like sticking around when the cops are on their way. Blue legs stayed to get high. She was that stupid.

Or maybe she wasn't. Maybe, if I'd had the chance to get high my own way, I'd have taken it too. But I just couldn't face more retching and head-aching. Electra walked so close to me I could touch her. Her head was down and her ears were pinned back. She looked as if someone had whipped her.

'I'm sorry,' I said. Suddenly all the anger that had been focussed on Smister and Pierre shattered into dozens of pieces and settled on Kerri Cropper for being such an incompetent loser, on her mother because all the things a mother could do wrong she'd done, and everything a grandmother could do wrong she'd done too. Everyone seemed to be scared of her, so she was a bully as well. I was angry with the housing authority for providing such a shit-hole for poor people to live in, I was angry with crappy education, and with the Social Services for not intervening to save a child from misery if not death. I was furious with neighbours for caring too little to take a risk.

And me. Ariadne Baguette, I thought, what a stupid name to make up. They'd know it was bogus and then they wouldn't send the cops or the paramedics. But I couldn't give my own name, could I? Well, *could* I? The cops hate me, and I don't like them a whole lot better. I didn't want to come to their attention again so soon after leaving Holloway.

By then I'd staggered to the decent part of Shoreditch High Street and felt so sick and angry I almost fainted. I sat down with a bump outside a pastry shop that was just closing. Electra lay down across my legs and went straight to sleep. She wasn't used to wandering the streets any more. And nor was I. I buried my head in my hands.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder and a voice said, 'Would you like a drink?'

'Red wine,' I said, as automatically as one of Pavlov's dogs.

He was tall and wore a butcher's apron. 'Business is so damn dicey I can't even afford wine for myself so I'm not going to pay for yours. But I've got a couple of croissants left over if you want.'

He brought them on a plate, and he brought sweet black coffee in a paper cup and a bowl of water for Electra.

I thought food would make me heave, but in fact I was ravenous. I wolfed down the pastry except for the mouthful I saved for Electra.

'I haven't eaten all day,' I said to the kind man. 'Thanks.'

He couldn't resist saying, 'Well maybe you should choose what you spend your money on more carefully.'

'What money?' I said righteously. 'I don't trouble the taxpayer. And I'll have you know I haven't had a drink in months. I go to AA.'

'How's that working out for you?' He sounded sceptical.

'Hard. I'm an alcoholic.'

'They say the hardest part is admitting it.'

'It's the easiest part.' Which in my case is true – I'll admit to anything if it'll get me another croissant. He went one better and brought me more sweet coffee and a slice of chocolate cake. It tasted like the most delicious thing I'd ever eaten, and drove the stench of sex and stairwells out of my nostrils. I almost forgot I'd been fighting with a junkie less than an hour ago. Sometime since then, darkness had fallen and I hadn't noticed.

The kind man let me feed Electra off one of his plates, but he wasn't kind enough to let me use his bathroom. He must've known I'd have it away with his bog paper, his soap and whatever else wasn't nailed to the wall.

'You're not stupid,' he said to me. 'Why can't you sort yourself out?'

'I fell in love with the Devil,' I said. 'He tore my heart out and threw it down a dirty stairwell. I've been searching for it ever since. You've no idea how much it hurts.'

'I see,' he said, retreating rapidly. 'Er, well, good luck with that, and with the AA.' He closed the door behind him and I heard him locking up tight.

We crossed the road and wandered into a side street to find a deep-set doorway where we could finish our sleep. I needed rest.

If a doorway is neglected enough to shelter a woman and her dog it is also a place where lazy drunk men will go to pee. I know this. I've lived on the streets for years and recognise all the smells of witless humanity. The risk I take in a dark doorway like this is that the next drunk will be a blind drunk who'll pee all over me, or a violent one who'll beat me up for being in his way.

Also, I was nervous because I'd been banged up inside, protected by the thick walls that imprisoned me, softened by a bed and removed from myself by medications. Inside you're reshaped by rules, and the rules are shaped by the educated folk who know how everyone should behave. When the rules fail, these wise folk lobotomise you with chemicals and brain anaesthetics. What a waste of money – I can do a similar job far more pleasantly and cheaply with the bottle of red wine they won't let me drink.

In the end I slept restlessly and dreamed I was back inside, in the prison kitchen. It was my job to feed the hungry, but the kitchen was rank with rotting meat, human excrement and maggots so I had to clean it first. But the task was too big, and the starving children started to cry.

I opened my eyes and listened to a clock strike eleven. Electra stirred and stretched. I put my arms around her and for a moment we warmed each other's bones. Then we got up, shook ourselves and left.

'Should I go back there?' I asked Electra. 'To the stairwell and the letterbox? Should I find out if anyone came to save Connor?'

I knew she'd say I should. She's kind to all living things and an example to us all.

'What if the blue-legged girl told Mrs Cropper about us? What if the man who doesn't like black babies doesn't like bag ladies and their dogs either?'

She gave me a look that whispered, 'No one likes bag ladies but everyone likes me.'

'Then we'll go home, I promise.'

'What home?'

'Oh fuck,' I said, because I noticed she was limping. She used to race before she was overtaken by younger dogs and her trainer threw her on the scrap-heap to die. Now she has arthritis, poor old bitch, and she'd been leading the soft life with Smister, Pierre and Cherry.

The streets around the flat where Connor Cropper lived were patrolled by roaming gangs of boys who reminded me of wolf packs marking and guarding their territory. Inside their perimeter, on the rough ground which surrounded the block, were shadowy groups of kids. In spite of the cold they sat or stood in rings, quiet as ghosts, warming their fingers on the chilly blue flames of their phone screens while they texted other ghosts elsewhere or nowhere. All I could hear was the cockroach rustle of fingernails on plastic and the odd colourless beep in reply. Occasionally the silence was broken by a shriek, a cry, a dog barking, a raucous laugh.

I thought we could pass unnoticed, but the frost-scorched earth of midnight belonged to teenagers alert for aliens. A pinched blue face would turn towards me, an elbow dug into neighbouring ribs. I was marked as an invader and word passed through the flickering blue ether.

At the bottom of the stairwell six or seven boys waited. From behind them, a thin girly voice said, 'That's her I was saying about – and her dog.'

My good deed for the day ended when I turned and fled. I let Electra go because, even arthritic, she can still run fast enough to escape a kicking from spotty kids.

I can't.

I stumbled across the wasteland, my shoelaces flapping and my backpack thumping its ragged rhythm on my spine.

They chucked me from one to another like a basketball until I fell down. Then I curled around my soft parts and let my backpack be my shell.

It's all a game I thought. I am the Devil's ball. His underage minions are having a kick-around. The Devil threw me into play and now I must roll or fly through the air, subject to the laws of force and inertia as applied to my arse by the toe of a trainer.

A woman of age and experience becomes a kids' plaything. Until death, I thought, because sometimes, on a whim, kids do decide to rid the world of someone homeless and helpless. 'Do it,' hisses King Worm 'It's fun. She's dirty, old and a waste of space. Who'll notice? Get your kicks – my kingdom is your Route 66. You are my players, on my team – have a ball, there are no rules to this game.'

And to me he said, 'Fool. Do you think you matter? Are your age, experiences, and memories of any consequence whatsoever? Are they even true? You are nothing but a figment of my imagination, you have no existence except what I allow you and I will play with you for as long as it pleases me.'

'Thud, thud, thud,' said the expensive trainers. You've got to listen to the trainers – they really do know what they're talking about.

But rain stopped play, and little Miss Blue-legs said, 'Why should I give a dry fuck what happens to my sister's bastard baby? Who do you think gave me my first rocks? My own fucking half-sister and her asshole boyfriend, that's who.' And away they ran so as not to get their Nikes wet.

After a while I sat up and said, 'Well at least they didn't pretend to be my friends.' Because red wine would have eased my pain but my so-called friends had made certain I would suffer every bruise, torn muscle and jarred bone without relief. They'd left me no escape from misery, or from King Worm laughing and saying, 'Well, that was fun. You still love me, don't you? You wouldn't begrudge a little pleasure to someone you love, would you?'

At this point I realised I'd lost my teeth and I scrabbled around on hands and knees till I found them. I rinsed them in the driving rain, and then stumbled blindly onward, looking for Electra.

Of course I couldn't find her, but somewhere along the way she found me. Then we walked. We trudged slowly and persistently away from the Cropper circle of Hell, mile after mile, putting as much distance behind us as we could. My mind was a circle of Hell too, or more accurately a wheel that spun endlessly, getting nowhere.

What had I done? A favour for a con? What had Kerri actually asked me to do? I couldn't remember. It was something about trying to persuade her mum not to let the social workers take her son away. Now there's a laugh. So I peeked through a letter box and saw a child – naked, crying, bruised and starving – and what did I do? I tried to call in the authorities; the same authorities I loathe and fear. 'And why did I do that?' I asked Electra. But

Electra limped along by my side without replying. So I had to answer myself. 'Because I have no power to change anything for a starving child,' I said out loud.

'Or a dog,' she would've said if only I could hear her.

Walking is a comfort to me – the slow rhythm quiets the noise in my head. The Devil's laughter is fainter when I'm on the move. But it isn't any comfort to Electra's arthritic joints. I comfort myself by torturing my friend.

I was glad that I could still walk. Several months ago I was kicked by someone, a rough sleeper like me, who knew the value of a good stout pair of ex-army boots. My plastic teeth are his gift, as are the scars and the crack in my skull that lets the night in. Adidas and Nike can't compete.

We found some pita and salad in a bin outside a kebab shop, and further on, some half nibbled fish and chips. It kept us going. Every now and then I found a nook or cranny to shelter in and then Electra would flop onto my legs and promptly fall asleep. I could rest my aching back, but I couldn't sleep.

I found a child's plastic raincoat in a bag outside a charity shop. I dried Electra and rubbed her down with a man's sweater before draping the raincoat over her back. An extra large hoody fitted me and joined the layers under my jacket. My thanks go to you impatient people who clear out your wardrobes but can't wait for a charity shop to open. There are folk all over London looking for garments to clothe themselves and their children who can't afford even charity shop prices. I am a member of the tribe who lives on your surplus.

The pulping rubbish in the rain outside a pizza place brought me back to Connor and the old neighbour woman posting a slice through the letterbox whenever her fat husband left any.

I thought about Kerri, Gorilla Crapper, and tried to remember what she was like last time I saw her. It wasn't a pretty memory. Three screws subdued her and dragged her away, naked, blue with cold and bruises from the tiles. She wasn't starving though, at least not for food. She ate everything she could get her greedy hands on. Her naked flesh, roughly treated, jubbled, gobbled, and sagged. I think once she told me she was nineteen years-old, but the excess lard made her look forty.

She was howling with rage and despair because I had just begun to suggest that Connor might be better off with the Social Services than in the tender loving care of her mother. Now that I'd seen him for myself and met Kerri's half-sister I was wondering how far the disease of poverty, ignorance and neglect had spread. Was he already infected beyond cure? Would he just starve to death and save everyone the bother of doing anything except locking up one more incompetent woman? Would the Social Services do a better job than Grandma Cropper? You'd hope so, wouldn't you?

I'm as bad as Smister and Pierre. I'd stuck my interfering nose in. I didn't do what Kerri asked. I thought I could do better. But I bungled it and probably no one came to help. I couldn't even find that out. All I discovered was that outsiders who stuck their noses in were violently discouraged. I couldn't help. I had no power – not even to influence the people who do have power.

'That's what I brought you here to show you,' the Devil giggled in my ear. 'You knew it already but you forgot it applies to you too. The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Don't try to change the results of my games. I choose carefully those I mean to torture. And I demand their love and respect. Good deeds, good intentions never saved anyone – they just prolong the agony. Can't you feel it – the pity, the writhing guilt in your gut, frustration and self-hatred? Ooh you do know how to give me pleasure. Mmm-mm.'

'Stop it,' I yelled, scattering the pre-dawn urban seagulls that were tearing apart a black rubbish bag and spilling its guts all over the pavement. That's me, I thought, a bag of rubbish pouring out my poisoned insides.

Electra nudged my hand with her wet nose, reminding me that I did have a friend whose life I could improve. Then I knew I had to go back to Cherry's house, if she'd have me. I'd take my pills – well, some of them – and try to be deaf to King Worm. Because King Worm was killing me from the inside.

5

A Really Bad Idea

‘We so did not poison you,’ Smister squawked. His sleek hi and lo-lighted bob trembled with sincerity. ‘We’re just giving you what the doctor prescribed, and you’re throwing it back in our faces.’

‘I wish I could,’ I muttered.

Pierre sat in his armchair like Buddha on an altar. Electra lay flat out under the coffee table, fast asleep.

‘Antabuse,’ I said, the way a judge might’ve said ‘murder’. ‘You didn’t tell me.’

‘Never heard of it. We just wouldn’t do a thing like that.’

‘Yeah we would.’ Pierre stretched his neck one way and then the other till it clicked. ‘We’re busted, Li’l Missy, might as well fess up.’

‘Well. It wasn’t my idea.’

‘Kinda was,’ Pierre said. He turned to me. ‘As you know, when you... er, went away, Li’l Missy here had nowhere to go, and she can’t drive. So we moved the ambulance. She was supposed to live in it, but she gets lonely so Cherry said she could use the spare room.’

‘It’s you that’s the problem, not me,’ Smister cut in. ‘Who’d want an alcoholic lunatic hanging around? Trouble was, Cherry went all righteous over the alcoholic lunatic’s dog.’

‘Animal lover,’ Pierre said proudly, ‘sweet as a cherry pie. But I screwed up royally telling the cops I was your AA sponsor.’

‘That was for Visiting Orders.’ Smissy sniffed.

‘Not that either of you ever bothered to visit.’ I was still aggrieved.

‘I’m a wanted woman,’ Smister said, ‘I bet there are posters.’

‘Anyway.’ Pierre’s voice went up a notch. ‘Keeping you off the sauce was a condition of you coming here. And you coming here became a condition of

your early release.'

'Early? Seemed like eternity to me.'

'Listen,' Smister said, 'I've grown since you've been away.'

'Yeah?'

'And I've changed, I don't go out to the clubs... '

'Much,' Pierre cut in.

'And I don't go pulling. I'm true to my darling endocrinologist.'

'Sometimes.'

'Pierre!' Smister squeaked. 'Why are you dumping on my love-buzz? You know I'm trying to be purer. And she...' He jerked his thumb in my direction. 'She's dragging me back down.'

'I'm dragging you down? You've no idea what you've done to me in the last forty-eight hours, have you? If Connor Cropper dies it'll be your fault, you and your interfering. If I could've had a little drink I wouldn't have gone there. But I couldn't. And I was sick – too sick to cope. So I stuffed up.'

'You don't know how to have a *little* drink,' Smister shouted.

'How do you know?' I shouted back. 'You've never seen me under normal circumstances.'

'There *are* no normal circumstances when you're around.'

'Who's dying?' Pierre asked. 'How did you stuff up?'

So I ignored Smister and told Pierre about Connor Cropper. I don't know why I think of a nineteen-stone drag-diva motor-mechanic as 'the sensible one.' He hadn't done very well by me, after all.

But Electra was sleeping peacefully under the coffee table. Her belly was full and she'd drunk clean water and some of my tea from a bowl marked 'K9'. She'd greeted Smister and Pierre with affection and searched the little house for Cherry. But Cherry was absent. She'd gone straight from work to Pilates. 'If you're dating a giant,' Smister explained crudely, 'you better stay supple.'

Electra has crap taste in humans. She even loves me, and I made her walk all night and hurt her poor old legs. I owe her, even if she won't talk to me.

'While you were in prison,' Smister said, returning to the subject of Connor, 'did you suddenly become an expert in child care? Cos last time I looked you didn't know piddle about kids.'

'I know bruises when I see them. And the poor kid couldn't even cry properly.'

'You're an expert on bruises – I'll give you that.' He eyed me critically. 'You really do know how to get kicked around. If it was a specialist subject you'd have a degree... '

'But you did manage to call 999,' Pierre put in, 'and you gave the kid's name and address?'

‘Yes but I gave a false name for myself and the call was interrupted. I didn’t know the girl with blue legs was Connor’s auntie. Not that she cared – she seemed really spiteful against him.’

Smister sighed, ‘Modern family life’s a thing of beauty, so it is.’

‘You did your best,’ Pierre said.

‘But no one listens. Doing my best is like doing nothing at all.’

Pierre stared at me. ‘It’s the price you pay for stepping outside of the mainstream. Or, in this case, it’s the price the little kid pays.’

‘Yeah,’ Smister said, ‘poor wee article. His saviour is a toothless, barmy vagrant.’

‘You’re hardly an advertisement for middle class values yourself.’

‘Hush, girls,’ Pierre warned. ‘We ain’t none of us operating in the normal zone.’

‘But she’s the worst. She can’t even put on an act.’

‘She could,’ Pierre said, ‘on the phone where no one can see her. She’s articulate enough and she’s got quite a classy accent. We could Google Shoreditch Social Services, ring ’em, and find someone she can be articulate with.’

‘Or we could all dress up as nuns,’ Smister said. ‘Everyone’s scared of nuns.’

I was horrified to see that Pierre was responding enthusiastically to this insane suggestion. But of course it would give their master, the Devil, a hard-on to see his minions dressed for holy orders.

‘Yeah, nuns delivering tracts,’ Pierre said. ‘We could hide our phones in our habits and take pictures of the kid through the letter box.’

‘And tell the Social Services we’ll post them on the Internet unless they do something.’

‘Do what?’ Cherry asked, coming through the door smelling of deodorant and girl-sweat. Her expression, when she saw me, was censorious. Smister kicked my already kicked ankle. I got to my feet.

‘Don’t you dare wake Electra,’ Cherry said. ‘She’s staying here till you learn how to treat her right.’

I was going to protest but I saw Smister aiming another shot at my poor ankle. So I lowered my head humbly and limped away to the ambulance.

I was too footsore and weary to do anything more than flop onto the bunk – a proper bunk with a mattress that dragged all the spare anxiety out of me. I was wondering if technology could really save Connor. If you had the right gismos and know-how it could provide many ways to blackmail or embarrass people or institutions into action.

But would the Lord of Lost Souls allow it?

‘Wait and see,’ he hissed gleefully. ‘Don’t try to out-guess me. You always get it wrong. Just try to please me.’

It’s true. Back when I thought he was an angel I did try to please him with scrambled eggs and smoked salmon. I bought him a classic Austin Healey Sprite. I showed him how to rob a bank. I took the blame for him. But he left me to swing in the breeze where flies and biting insects could gnaw on my living flesh.

I turned over and stuck my fingers in my ears.

Listen to me. This is why I need a drink. I need red wine – communion wine, so that I can commune with my dog. My dog is wise and kind. She doesn’t lie to me She doesn’t just pretend to love me. If you had to choose between dog and Devil, who would you choose?



‘These are the rules,’ Cherry said without a ‘hello, did you sleep well?’ ‘You take your pills every morning and every evening at the kitchen door. You don’t just bugger off with that poor old dog for days on end. I took her to the vet and she says the arthritis is particularly bad in her left hind leg... ’

‘It’s the way they run them round the track,’ I said. ‘It puts extra stress on the inside legs.’

‘... and arthritis doesn’t get better. It only goes one way – bad to worse. In the end all you can do is manage the pain. Dragging her all over London is not the way to do it. I thought you loved Electra. How can you be so cruel?’

‘It was the Antabuse.’

‘It was the selfishness. How can you look after her properly if you’re drunk and out of control?’

‘How can I look after her properly if I’m spewing up and... ’

‘If you don’t drink you won’t spew.’

‘If I don’t drink the Devil... ’

‘Oh right, the Devil made you do it. Get over yourself. That crap won’t wash with me.’

I hadn’t noticed before, but her pretty blue eyes were steely and she stared at me with the expression of someone who knows she’s right.

I said, ‘I do love Electra. We’ve even been through fire together.’ I lowered my eyes humbly. ‘So I really want to thank you for taking her in and looking after her for me... ’

‘I didn’t do it for you. I did it for Pierre.’

‘Yes. You can see how lovely and loving she is. They were going to put her down, you know.’

‘Till you saved her – but that doesn’t give you the right to mistreat her.’ Faultless logic and as responsive as a brick.

‘I didn’t mean to go all the way to Shoreditch. But I was sick so I couldn’t stay still – I had to keep moving to stop the cravings and the voices, and I made a promise to a friend while I was away.’

‘And that’s another thing...’ Cherry’s eyes were flooded with the light of righteousness. Satan, the seducer, loves eyes like that. ‘You’re such a grab bag of barmyness I don’t know what’s real and what’s not. You’ve got my Pierre and Little Miss talking about Sisters of Mercy rescuing some kid. I had to talk sense into them. So listen, take your pills, look after Electra and leave my Pierre alone.’

Away she went, cute and carefully groomed, smelling sweet and righteous. She was scary. I gave her half an hour to leave for work and then I went, meek and mild, to the kitchen door.

‘Hurry up,’ Smister said. ‘We’re going to the Bull and Bush Costumiers. I love it there.’

‘But Cherry said...’

‘I’m giving you a break,’ Pierre said, handing me some pills and a glass of water. ‘You gotta take the anti-nutso pills, but I’m letting you off the Antabuse. You looked like a sick ghost last night. But I’m warning you...’

‘I know. I swear...’

‘You better.’

‘Can we go now?’ Smister was wearing his red fur coat and jiggling his handbag.

‘Where’s Electra?’

Pierre and Smister exchanged a meaningful glance. Pierre said, ‘Yeah, well, Cherry took her to work this morning.’

‘Pierre,’ I said, ‘she’s my dog.’

‘Cherry said if you aren’t going to look after Electra properly you don’t deserve her.’ Smister sniffed impatiently.

‘Shut it,’ Pierre said. ‘Momster, she’s still your dog. Cherry just wants to give her what she needs.’

‘I can give her what she needs.’

‘You haven’t *got* what she needs,’ Smister jeered.

I knew he was right. But it hurt like a hole in the heart to hear it.

‘Leave it,’ Pierre said. ‘Think about something else. We’re on an errand of mercy.’

‘I’m going to look like Audrey Hepburn in *The Nun’s Story*.’ Smister assumed a look of innocence and holiness.

‘And I’m going as Whoopi Goldberg.’

‘Isn’t it ironic? The only one who’ll look like she’s in drag will be Lady B.’
‘Can it,’ said Whoopi Goldberg.

6

Half Woman, Half Penguin

The first time I met Smister he was dressed as a nun. He was doing a doorstep scam and very convincing he was too. The only problem was that then his fingers were yellow with nicotine and he smelled like a spittoon. Now, after Cherry made him give up smoking as a condition of residency in her house, his hands were clean and his breath was fragrant. Nothing spoiled the illusion of purity.

Pierre was a triumph and I don't know how he did it. He was still huge and muscular but he'd added the mysterious elements of sincerity, sweetness and devotional calm. He wasn't just a nun; he was a nun you could trust.

As predicted, the one who didn't look like a religious woman was me. The white wimple and black robes didn't feminise me in the least. They made me look like an old man at a bad Halloween party.

'We'll have to leave her in the car,' Smister said. 'Remember to crack a window.'

'She isn't so bad.'

'I feel like an idiot.'

'You should be feeling like a nun,' Smister said, 'even an idiot nun.'

'She doesn't know how to inhabit a costume. It's a skill.'

They stared at me critically while I tried to inhabit the habit.

'Maybe she doesn't remember how to feel like a woman,' Pierre said.

'She had a boyfriend once. But he... '

'I told you that in confidence,' I yelled. 'I loved the Devil and he made sport of me. He tore my heart out. He froze the woman inside me and left her to shrivel and die. He... '

'Peace,' said Pierre. 'Live in peace. We will protect you. You don't have to be a woman to live in god's love.'

I swear he believed himself. And I nearly believed him too except I knew the Lord of the Lies was speaking out of his mouth.

Wholly ignorant of the Lord of Lies, Smister said, 'I'll be banjaxxed to buggry and back if we can even make a half-woman-half-penguin out of her.'

They descended on me, tweaking, twitching and powdering until, after twenty minutes, Smister said, 'Well, I suppose we've managed the half penguin side of the equation. But she'll still have to stay in the car, so she will.'

I don't know why I let any of this happen. Maybe I was glad of the chance to be passive for a change, or maybe I was tired of my own stupidity and wanted to find out if the consequences of someone else's stupidity were any better. Maybe riding on another idiot's energy relieved me of responsibility. Maybe prison had battered me into a state of suggestibility. Maybe I'd lost my one true friend to a younger more fitting woman and I needed distraction. So many maybes, so little certainty.

Pierre parked his Vauxhall People Carrier in the delivery area of Fortress Cropper. The block loomed above us, a monument to deprivation. Gang-tagging and garbage were the only signs of humanity.

I said, 'I don't want to be left alone. What if those kids come and recognise me?'

'They won't,' Smister said. 'But someone has to stay with the car or there'll be no engine or wheels when we get back.'

'I'll leave you the keys,' Pierre said. 'We'll pray for you but lock yourself in if you're worried.'

They sailed away holding up the hems of their robes to avoid the puddles of last night's rain. They wore plain black shoes and thick black stockings. Dressing up was nourishment to their twisted souls. They flourished in costume. I didn't. Maybe I am unflourishable – a dry stick that can only break into smaller and smaller splinters. The Devil pretended to love me and now I am a nun with no soul, a lover with no heart and I've lost Electra to Miss Righteous Cherry Pie.

I sat in Pierre's car and waited. The clock on the dashboard told me I'd waited from 11.05 to 11.27. My breath misted the windows and shrank my world to the size of a metal lockup, a tiny submarine. I was trapped and running out of oxygen. I started to shake and pant. Sweat dribbled down my ribs.

I flung the door open and tumbled out into the cold damp air. I was thinking about Electra with Cherry's hand stroking her, of Electra's eyes looking at Cherry with devotion, gratitude and dependence. I crumpled up with failure and jealousy.

Without my cure-all wine, the only thing I could do was move – walk away

from the shame of being me, lose myself in the rhythm of footsteps.

I walked in a circle around the Vauxhall. Then I walked in a circle around Castle Cropper with my nun's habit flapping round my legs like a sheet. But this only brought me back to the car – and to myself.

'Don't leave the car,' I told myself as I locked the doors. And, 'You absolutely must not leave the car,' I said as I hid the keys in the tail pipe.

'Walk,' whispered the Devil. 'It'll make you feel better and that's all that matters. You know the way. Your moral compass should always point towards yourself.'

So I walked.

'You don't owe them anything,' continued the Prince of Personal Justification. 'It's their fault that Cherry appropriated your dog.'

'I've got to get her back,' I said, 'with or without your help.'

'What's that?' said an old woman in a coat twice her size. She was standing at a bus stop. 'You want some help?'

'For the poor,' I said. 'They say the Lord will provide but I've been waiting a long time.'

'Me too,' she said, handing me a pound coin, 'That vow of poverty must be a bleedin' trial.'

'It was the vow of chastity that put me off,' said a big, busty woman in a coat half her size. 'My mum wanted me to go to the Sisters, but I loved the boys too much. I got five kids now, so maybe she did know best after all. You don't think when you're fifteen, do you?'

'It's a hard life,' I said, accepting the coin she handed me, 'and it's not for everyone.'

'It's a hard life for all of us,' said a middle-aged baldie in a coat that fit him perfectly. He gave me a five pound note. 'I don't believe in all that mumbo-jumbo myself. But good luck to you anyway.'

'Bless you all.' I didn't know how to cross myself correctly so I just held up my hand like the Virgin Mary does in paintings. I was amazed – maybe there was a point to the costume lark after all. It was much easier bumbling around talking to myself if people thought I was praying rather than pissed or potty. And people gave me money without even being asked. Well, not to me – they gave money to the costume. They didn't see me. When I was with Electra they didn't really see me either. They gave money to her. It's easier to like a dog than a woman. I understand that. I'm exactly the same.

Electra must know that. She must know she's my only true friend and that I love her. Okay so I don't have a car to drive her in and I don't have enough money to take her to an expensive vet. It's true that sometimes, just occasionally, I haven't been able to buy her proper dogfood. And she might

possibly argue that those very few occasions were because I spent the money on red wine. But she can't deny that I'm devoted to her and she used to be devoted to me. Before Cherry came along.

'Maybe Cherry had you locked up,' murmured the Worm in my brain, 'so that she could steal Electra.'

'Cherry didn't even know us before I got locked up.'

'Are you sure about that?' The Worm slithered into its warm burrow under my skull, behind my ear. 'Electra's the most valuable of all your possessions. Even Smister stole her once. Remember? He's no friend of yours, but he's a friend of Cherry's. She's predatory. First she takes your friends. Then she takes your best friend.'

'My possessions?' I asked. 'I have no possessions.'

'Of course you don't,' said a woman in a smart green raincoat. 'You're a nun. Now please give this to the poor children.' She pushed a tenner into my hand as if I were a charity box.

I bowed my head with what I hoped was grace and dignity. The woman looked at me with a strange expression so I moved on double-quick. I was tired and I didn't know where I was anymore. Also I had seventeen quid in my hand and no pocket to put it in. Maybe real nuns have pockets but pretend runs don't. I couldn't exactly buy a handbag because I don't suppose real nuns have those either.

Finding myself outside a pet shop with seventeen pounds in my hand made me realise that I hadn't bought Electra a present for ages. Maybe that was why she'd gone off with Cherry. Cherry could give her stuff. I couldn't.

Well, not any more. I went in and bought a squeaky chew chicken, a proper chew bone, and a couple of cans of Bow-Chow. The shop assistant gave me the bone for free and too much change, as well as a plastic bag to put everything in. She also directed me to the bus stop and the bus which would take me to the North Circular Road. I was going back to Cherry's house to find Electra. My life had no starting blocks without her. I was drifting like a dead bird on a pond.



It was dark when I got there, but I noticed Pierre's people carrier in front of the house. I crept round to the back. My plan was to change clothes in the Ambo but I saw the light on in the kitchen so I went to the back door instead.

I could hear the shouting without even opening the door. Cherry was repeating, 'Are you insane? I told you – I *told* you.' And, 'I want her gone by morning.'

Pierre was rumbling something I couldn't make out but I heard Smister plainly: 'It wasn't our fault. Honest it wasn't.'

'I don't care whose fault it was,' she yelled. 'You've all sunk to her level. You got to sort this out or I'll call the... '

'Cherry... honey!' It was the first time I'd ever heard Pierre raise his voice.

I knew Electra would hate the shouting, so I opened the kitchen door. I didn't have to call or whistle. I said her name quietly and there she was, smiling, waving to me and pushing her wet nose into my hand.

'C'mon,' I said. 'Let's get away from the crazy people.'

7

Prayer Not Helping

I knew I couldn't drive the Ambo far because there was hardly any petrol in the tank. But I didn't think I'd have to go far. All Cherry wanted was for me to be gone from her house. So gone I would be, and Electra would be gone too – stick a spoon in that and suck it up, Miss Respectability.

The motor started at the fourth attempt and I reversed the lumbering, protesting lump of metal onto the street. Electra sat beside me on the front seat. We were alone together at last. My tear ducts started to ache. I reached out to stroke the softness of her ears. She lay down with her head on my thigh and closed her eyes. This reminded me that I was driving through the dark with no lights. But I couldn't find the switch.

I turned onto the main road where the street lighting was better. But the traffic was worse and cars started honking at me and flashing their headlights – huge steel monsters, all wearing their hate-faces, screaming at me.

Sweat wilted my wimple. My hands gripped the wheel as if it were a life jacket. But I still couldn't remember where the light switch was.

I saw a Texaco sign so I wrenched wheel and the Ambo lurched wildly onto the entry ramp. Where it died.

But we were alive, Electra and I. My trembling hands still clung to the steering wheel. 'What do I do now?' I asked her. But she just smiled sweetly and went back to sleep.

A Sikh guy in a Texaco bib and a blue turban opened the driver's side door. 'Can't stop here,' he said. 'Blocking entrance, isn't it?'

I couldn't let go of the wheel.

'Prayer not helping,' the guy said. 'You have to move. Turn on engine, I'm thinking, innit.'

Obediently I turned the key. 'Worry, worry, worry,' said the engine tiredly.

It sounded as dry and thirsty as I felt. I turned the key four more times, and the engine worried four more times.

‘Now you are killing battery,’ said the Sikh. ‘Also blocking entrance to pumps.’

Behind the Ambo a queue of motors was forming. Some began shouting at me. I covered my face with my hands. The world smelled so sharply of anxiety, overheated metal and poison gas that it choked me. I got out of the cab and lifted Electra down from the passenger side. She was tired and reluctant.

The Sikh climbed into the driver’s side and worried the engine some more. ‘No gas,’ he said disgustedly. Meanwhile another half dozen cars piled up behind us – everyone hooting, everyone snarling.

‘Chaos,’ chuckled the Devil. ‘Ooh you *do* know what I like. Keep this up and there’ll be accidents. If we’re lucky, someone might be mangled into bloody schnitzels.’

Dazzled by headlights, deafened by the anger blaring from every horn, breathless, I turned away.

‘Oy,’ the guy said. ‘I got a spare can. Half gallon gets you to pumps. Then you fill up. Okay?’

He wasn’t a bad man or an unkind one. I’d made a mess of his forecourt and bugged his business.

I said, ‘But there’s no money left.’ I went round to the passenger side of the Ambo. In the carrier bag from the pet shop was dogfood, a bone, a rubber chicken and eighty-seven pence. I showed it to the Sikh. He blinked in disbelief.

A group of men left their cars and vans and advanced on us. The Sikh spread his hands and shrugged. He reached into the pet shop bag and brought out the eighty-seven pence which he displayed in the palm of his hand to the gathering crowd.

‘No dosh, innit,’ he said resignedly.

‘Just move this heap of crap,’ said an exceptionally helpful guy in a padded parka. The Devil applauded him silently and whispered in his ear. The man went on, ‘I don’t care if she’s Mother Theresa back from the grave. I don’t like nuns and she’s gotta get that piece of shit out of the way.’ He looked at me and the rubber chicken with such disdain that I chucked it into the back of the Ambo before he could comment further. I bowed my head so that he’d think I was praying and wouldn’t see my bruises. A guy like that would exploit any weakness.

‘Traffic cops,’ suggested a man in plasterer’s overalls. ‘They’ll be here next and I don’t want no nosey fucker checking my tax disc.’

‘Language,’ said someone else.

‘Yeah, show some respect.’

‘It’s not like she’s showing us any,’ said the nun-hater in the parka. I could smell beer on his breath and I hated him back.

I said, ‘I’m praying for peace and redemption but the vow of poverty and a bad back prevent me from taking more practical action.’

I could see the Devil urging the nun-hater to make an even more inflammatory reply when he was interrupted by a child crying loudly. The lonely, hopeless wail was one I’d heard before. It was coming from the back of the Ambo.

I thought, if I run away now nothing bad will happen. But I stood, paralysed, waiting for fate’s hatchet to fall on my unprotected neck.

The Sikh opened the back door of the Ambo.

‘Blimey O’Riley,’ said the plasterer. ‘Who we got here then?’

It was Connor Cropper. Of course it was. Who did you think it was?

Fate’s hatchet sliced through vertebrae and throat with a swish and a crunch. The Master of Nasty Surprises sneezed and sniggered, ‘I bet you didn’t see that coming. Am I ever on top of my game?’

Connor was standing next to the bunk, his mouth a gaping hole of misery. He was wearing a shapeless stripy jersey that had once belonged to me, and round his ankles was a soiled wet bath towel. He looked like a kid who’d just been hit on the head by a rubber chicken.

‘This don’t look too pretty,’ the plasterer said.

He was right. Even in a woman’s jumper Connor looked dreadful, his little legs were stick thin and mottled with bruises.

‘Wha’s happening?’ asked the Sikh, his eyes flicking from me to Connor and back.

I muttered, ‘This is what happens when Pierre and Smister get creative.’

‘Prayer still not helping.’

‘This kid’s starving,’ shouted the plasterer, making Electra cringe and Connor cry louder.

‘You read about this stuff in the papers,’ said the nun-hater. ‘Priests and nuns, see – perverts, the lot of ’em.’

Everyone looked to me for an answer. I said, ‘Electra is a rescue dog. The child is a rescue child. What you see is the Devil’s work. The Prince of Darkness provides in his own evil way. I’m praying that the Lord of Light and the kindness of strangers will provide something better.’

‘What a load of garbage,’ said the nun-hater. ‘You know what she’s doing, don’t you? She wants us to fork out our hard-earned cash just to move her off this fucking ramp.’

‘Can’t you stop the kid crying like that?’ asked a business type.

‘He’s three years-old,’ I said. ‘He’s hungry, wet, cold and alone. If you can’t cry then, when can you cry?’

The business type reached into the Ambo to offer Connor his hand. Connor bit him and retreated to the back screaming.

‘He doesn’t understand kindness,’ someone else said.

‘His mum’s been in prison most of his life,’ I told them all. ‘There’s a lot of work to be done.’

‘No shit!’ said the business type, nursing a chewed thumb. ‘Hope the dog’s got a better nature.’

Electra replied by hopping up into the back of the Ambo and sitting down between Connor and the rest of us. She kept well out of range of his teeth. He stopped screaming, stuffed his fist into his mouth and emitted strangled moans instead.

‘This is dreadful,’ the business type said. ‘You see this kind of thing in Romanian orphanages. But not here.’

‘Connor’s home grown – every pitiful inch of him,’ I said firmly.

‘Guys, guys,’ pleaded the Sikh, ‘think queue, think forecourt, traffic cops, many et ceteras.’

‘Yeah,’ the plasterer agreed. ‘We gotta get her moving or we’ll be stuck here.’

‘Toldya,’ said the nun-hater. ‘Didn’t I say?’

‘Shut up and effing push!’ said the plasterer.

The Sikh got into the driver’s seat and about half a dozen men pushed. I did nothing except stand with my hands folded, head bent, like a nun in prayer. I was passive, broke and gasless, helpless against the forces of society. And yes, the nun-hater was right – I *was* waiting for everyone else to get me out of the mess I was in. I live on charity anyway, so I wasn’t making any extra effort – except that I’d inadvertently dressed like someone who deserved it.

They pushed the Ambo to the rear of the forecourt where it was not quite blocking the air dispenser. Then they dispersed as quickly as they could. The plasterer gave me a ten pound note. The nun-hater gave me a look that could wither spring flowers.

I screwed up my nerve and reopened the back door of the Ambo. I peeked in and Electra jumped out. Connor was sitting in his own filth strangling the squeaky chicken. His face was screwed up in an expression of murderous intent. He glanced up at me once and his features spasmed into a rictus of hatred and fear.

‘Someone else who hates nuns, eh?’ I said in what I thought was a soothing voice. Even Electra backed away. I shut the door again. The little boy was an extremely disturbing sight.

I took the ten pound note to the Texaco shop and found the Sikh in conference with a tiny octogenarian. Her white hair was tied back with a shoelace into a thin ponytail and she wore outrageously sexy gold-studded sandals on her gnarly old feet.

‘If you’re a kosher nun, I’m a ham sandwich,’ she pronounced, giving me the once-over with bleached-out eyes. ‘But there’s always a daft one – even in convents.’

‘They let me drive the van,’ I said meekly.

‘Can’t drive tonight,’ the Sikh said. ‘Battery buggered.’

‘But them tossers left you in charge of a baby?’

‘It wasn’t supposed to happen that way.’

‘This good lady is Mrs Dora...’

‘My son started sniffing around his granddaughter. But we soon put a stop to all that nonsense, didn’t we?’

‘Oh my, yes,’ the Sikh said with great respect. ‘Double-quick.’

‘So what do you know about babies?’ Mrs Dora fixed her foggy gaze on me, ‘Got any yourself? Well you wouldn’t, would you? Why, on god’s flat earth, do they put you people in charge of children?’

‘I only drive the van.’

‘Shouldn’t be doing that, even at all,’ the Sikh said.

‘So where is the poor little mite then?’

The poor mite was tearing the head off a rubber chicken with his pointy little teeth. The chicken was squeaking feebly.

‘He don’t half stink,’ said Mrs Dora. ‘What’s his name?’

‘Connor.’

‘Oy stinky,’ she said. ‘Look at me when I’m talking to you. Are you hungry or what?’

Connor looked at her and started screaming.

I closed the van door. A few seconds later the screaming stopped and the feeble squeaking began again.

‘He’s feral,’ Mrs Dora decided.

‘He’s Satan’s child,’ I said, because I’d seen that look before.

‘Well they’re all Satan’s spawn, ain’t they?’ Mrs Dora said comfortably. ‘Nothing new there. You got to spend the night here with the little horror. What you going to do?’

All I could think of was to drag him and the mutilated chicken back to Cherry’s house and dump him on Smister and Pierre. This was their fault, their crazy game, their mess. Let them clean it up. Let Miss Perfect help them out – she was never wrong or made any mistakes. She’d soon remake this catastrophic world in her own self-righteous image.

I must've looked as helpless as I felt because the Sikh said, 'Prayer still not helping.'

Mrs Dora plucked the crumpled ten pound note out of my hand. 'I'm calling for backup,' she said, 'but it'll cost you ten quid an hour.' Out of a huge tartan bag she pulled the highest of high-tech phones. She opened it and yelled, 'Get your arses down 'ere as soon as. We're on the frigging clock.' She slipped and toddled her way back to the warmth of the Texaco shop to finish bellowing out her orders.

I followed behind more slowly. Now that I no longer had ten pounds I found I wasn't welcome in the shop. Instead I sat down outside next to the wilting bunches of flowers and the newspaper vending machines. I was tired and queasy because I'd had nothing to eat or drink all day. Electra was tired too. She lay across my lap sheltered from the cold wind by my long black robe. As usual, she said nothing, but I could see she was hungry.

'Freedom, day three?' I asked her. I couldn't remember. It seemed weeks ago that I'd walked out of chokey with nothing on my mind but hugging Electra and celebrating with a swig of red. Since then I'd been fed cocktails of mind-corrupting toxins and my best friend was taken from me. I can't blame Electra – she's a dog and it's in her lovely nature to do what she's told if she wants food and shelter – same as me, really. Except my nature isn't half as lovely. Nor is Smister's – he clings weakly, like bindweed, to whoever he thinks will support him with a spare room and access to a well-lit bathroom mirror. That's why he got to know me all that time ago – he thought I had cash.

I thought Pierre was different. He was the illusionist who made people believe that a nineteen-stone motor-mechanic could be a petite diva. He'd seemed so strong in his position outside the norm. He'd seemed to have infinite care and compassion to spend on others who were persecuted by normality. But no. Wrong again. When it comes to the girlfriend, Perfect Miss Cherry with her icy little eyes, he's just like any other bloke led panting along her chosen path with his dick in his hand. He'll betray anyone and anything for a fuck. And *that*, so I've found, is the norm.

These were my friends. They dumped me with a feral child in an ex-ambulance with a bollixed battery and no fuel. I hope *you've* got better friends than mine.

I played with the gimcrack crucifix the guys had slung round my neck that day and discovered that the tiny Jesus hanging from the cross was sporting a woody. That must've been Smister and Pierre's idea of a joke but no one had told me. Or more probably it was the work of the Prince of Cruel Jokes. Who else would dress me in the clothes of chastity then sling a pornographic

crucifix round my neck? After all, he put my life in the hands of Pierre who was the obedient servant to his own needy greedy dick, Smister who was trying to get rid of his in favour of a needy greedy pussy and Cherry Ice who could pull their strings by dispensing or denying sex and shelter.

I too am Lord Satan's creature because of sex. I am in this ridiculous position, sitting next to the guilty-conscience carnations, wearing a joke Jesus, because I craved love and the caressing, torturing hand of the Devil. I gave him my love, my sex, my soul. He asked for my money, my house, my reputation and my expertise with customer accounts. I handed them to him on a plate. He took my freedom and after that he took my mind and played pinball with it.

There's an empty, unfillable pit where my heart used to be that aches like a rotting tooth. Or it would do if the Devil hadn't played dice with my teeth as well.

Electra raised her beautiful slender head and looked at me with warm golden eyes. 'Yes,' I said, 'and then there was you. But we don't talk any more, do we? – thanks to Antabuse.' I laid my hand on her skull and ran my thumb gently between those angel eyes.

A woman said, 'That's what I like to see – a nun blessing a dog.' She was on her way into the shop to pay for a tankful of gas.

'Maybe it should be the other way round,' I said.

She stopped and stared at me in surprise. 'I didn't think you lot believed dogs have souls.'

'If god made a creature he gave it a soul,' I said firmly. Of course I don't believe god made anything at all. Creation was a blind cosmic accident that the Devil has fun with. 'But mainstream theology isn't my thing,' I added apologetically.

'Are you a Franciscan? Are you collecting for something?'

'She's hungry.' I stroked Electra. 'And in the shop there are people who're trying to help with, er, the van – only they're charging ten pounds an hour so now I'm flat broke.' I ignored the question about Franciscans because all I knew about St Francis was that he talked to the animals. Just like me. She didn't notice. She was a tall, rangy woman who looked as if she didn't faff around. She immediately reached in her pocket.

'No – if I go in there with money, they'll take it for the van. But bless you all the same.'

'If you want to feed a dog, buy dogfood,' she said and marched away.

'Sorry,' I said to Electra. 'There's food in the Ambo but I'm scared of Connor.'

She snuggled closer in a way that said, 'So am I,' but she was still hungry.

A Hyundai screeched to a halt beside me and a man jumped out, almost

braining me with the swinging door. He bought an evening paper before he noticed he was stepping on my habit. 'God! Sorry. Didn't see you down there. Sorry, sorry. Are you collecting for lost dogs? Here, take my change.' He dropped a handful of coins into my lap and was gone in a cloud of carbon monoxide and citrus cologne.

There was more than enough for a can of Bow-Chow for her and a sandwich for me but I stayed where I was. I didn't want to give our food money to Mrs Dora.

A Range Rover drove onto the forecourt. Two huge men and one tiny woman got out and went into the shop. Five minutes later Mrs Dora came out and asked, 'What does he eat?'

'She,' I said. 'Bow-Chow and I wouldn't say no to...'

'The stinky kid,' she snapped. 'What you got – poop for brains?'

'I only know about pizza. Sometimes a neighbour woman posted pizza slices through the letter box.'

'Firkin' criminal,' she said, tottering away on her sexy sandals, pushing past the rangy woman who was exiting through the same door.

The rangy woman squatted down beside me to pat Electra. She had a can of Bow-Chow in one hand and a paper plate in the other. Electra sat up eagerly. The woman pulled the ring opener and plopped the gruesome contents onto the paper plate. Electra smiled at her and waved her tail before tucking in. Only then did the woman hand me a cheese sarnie. She didn't even look at me but she stroked Electra's shoulder blades while she ate.

'Thank you,' I said, trying to sound nunly and dignified while tearing into bread and cheese.

'I'm amazed that your convent hasn't sent out someone to help you.' She didn't take her eyes off Electra. 'And I'm not sure you should trust Mrs Dora's family. They look a bit iffy to me.'

'Beggars can't be choosers,' I said, happy for once to be telling the truth. 'No one trusted the Good Samaritan either.'

'The Good Samaritan didn't charge ten pounds an hour,' she said tartly. She gave Electra a final pat and straightened up adding almost sheepishly, 'It could be a mistake, but I've paid for another two hours. Make sure you get my money's worth.' And off she went, too brisk to hear my mumbled thanks.

'I suppose I should be feeling guilty,' I said, as I held the paper plate so that Electra could lick up the last smear of food. 'But I don't. After all I've got a little boy and a dog to feed. I'm only doing what a nun should be doing – looking after the needy and hoping for the best. At least I suppose that's what praying is. Only praying is directional and hoping isn't.'

Electra sighed and lay down across my legs again. She gave me a sleepy,

satisfied smile and I could almost hear her say, 'I don't care what you pretend to be as long as it gets me a full belly.'

Mrs Dora appeared at my side again in a puff of sulphur. 'Wakey-wakey, Sister Dafty, yes you. You ain't here to kip your life away. You've got a kiddie needs looking after who ain't gonna look after his self. So snap lively.'

Electra and I scrambled to our feet.

'Yer dog looks like a skellington, and you don't look like you scarfed much recently. It's all right you nuns starving your divvy selves to death, but kiddies and dogs need their firkin' meat and two veg.'

'I'm just the transport nun,' I mumbled.

'And a firkin' fine job you made of that an' all.'

'We're a poor order.'

'So am I but I still managed to feed my kids.'

'Connor was only just given into our care...'

'Care, my arse,' she said and led the way back to the Ambo where two huge men and one tiny woman were loading Connor into a black bin bag. Only his head poked out and he was roaring. The tiny woman shut him up by stuffing a chunk of chocolate into his mouth.

'That's my Misha. She knows how to care for kids,' Mrs Dora said proudly.

Misha said, 'Shit in a pit, does he ever need a scrub! What's a matter with you god-botherers? Don't you know nothing about kids?'

'This one's as much use as a lace condom,' Mrs Dora said, jerking her aged thumb in my direction.

'You shouldn't say that,' one of the huge men said. 'Catholics and condoms don't mix.' He and Misha bundled Connor, now sucking loudly rather than crying, into the luggage space at the back of the Range Rover and they drove away into the night.

This left the second huge man by himself. He said, 'Where's your battery?'

'Don't ask her,' Mrs Dora said. 'She's got poop-for-brains.'

'It might be under the passenger seat, and bless you.'

'What you doing, blessing my Tony? Get back here and clean the shite out of the back of this here honey-wagon.'

8

Sweet Charity

Hampered by my habit, the best I could do was to chuck out soiled rugs and clothing. I swabbed what was swabbable with the disinfected water Misha and the two giants had brought with them. The Ambo still didn't smell sweet. Maybe it never did. I couldn't remember. Cold water and a cold wind made my hands raw. It was my prison job all over again – cleaning up other people's shit.

'It's your own fault,' Satan sniggered. 'You're being paid back for not cleaning up after yourself. This mess began with you. Count the steps. They started when you chose me for your lover.'

'You chose me.'

'I might have called. You didn't have to answer. There were plenty of opportunities to step back and deny me.'

'You never told me you were the Devil. You pretended to be a man who loved me. You made me feel *special*.'

'At your age? With your looks? Don't make me laugh,' said the Lord of Cruel Jokes, laughing. 'A forty-year-old virgin, living with her mother – don't be so naïve. You weren't a relationship – you were a business opportunity. Any man worth his salt knows he can get whatever he wants by convincing a woman that she's *special*.' He spat out the word 'special' as if it was the dirtiest word in the dictionary, and I knew he was telling the truth. I felt the wind-frozen tears on my face. Some jokes never get old. But I do.

Mrs Dora said, 'If you're asking god for his help, don't waste your time. Roll your sleeves up and help yourself.'

'She is doing,' Tony said. His forearms were streaked with black oil and tattooed with Maori designs. 'This battery wouldn't light a torch. She needs a new one. Get Lance back and we'll go to the yard.'

‘I’ll talk to Jimmy Singh,’ she said. ‘Meantime, just effing get on with it, the both of you.’

‘Don’t mind her,’ Tony said, when she’d gone. ‘She’s a force of nature, my gamma. I won’t say she’s got a heart of gold, cos sometimes she ain’t got a heart at all, but she do get stuff done. Our family would of fallen apart ten times over if it wasn’t for Gamma.’

‘Are you the one who liked Mr Singh’s daughter?’

‘Still do,’ he said, his face creasing in a fond smile. ‘Dads and gammas think they got the world sewn up. Think they know it all.’

I thought he smiled a good and trustworthy smile. He had his feet planted on the earth as if he knew he belonged there. I hoped he hadn’t picked the wrong woman. The wrong woman can twist a sweet smile till it turns sour. Look what Kerri Cropper’s mum did to Connor. Look what Cherry was doing to Pierre. And I am the result of what a bad *man* can do. Look and learn.

‘Corrosion,’ Tony said as if he could read my thoughts. ‘This battery’s knackered.’

‘I can’t afford a new one,’ I said, counting through the change the Hyundai man chucked in my lap. There was six pounds, thirty-one pence. He threw money as if it was breadcrumbs for birds.

‘I dunno how you got this far without conking out.’

‘I don’t either.’

‘D’you mind if I come in out of this wind?’

We both climbed into the back of the Ambo. Thoughtlessly he pulled a tobacco tin out of a pocket and started rolling a cigarette. I didn’t stop him. Social control is Cherry Pie’s bag, not mine. I might be dressed like the army of righteousness, but I still knew who I was. And I’d just left the prison system where there are more smokers per hundred of the population than you’ll find anywhere else on earth. I wasn’t going to judge.

But that seemed to be what he wanted me to do. We sat on the bunk bed with Electra asleep between us, him smoking, me resting. After a while he said, ‘I do believe in god – I was brought up Church of England. I know you’re RC but I was wondering...’

I said nothing but waited in fear of religious questions I couldn’t answer.

He went on, ‘Jimmy Singh’s daughter is Harpreet Kaur. I call her Pretty. She believes in one god too. Do we believe in the same god? That’s what I want to know.’

I said, ‘If there is only one, there is only one. Don’t think about same; think about name.’

‘Yeah,’ he said, ‘lots of names for the same thing. But think about cars.’

I thought about cars but came up empty.

‘There’s loads of different cars – Hondas, Vauxhalls, Mercedes, et cetera. They’re all cars but they’re not the same. And, think about this – someone who drives a Bentley wouldn’t be seen dead in a Skoda.’

‘The Devil comes in many guises too,’ I interrupted. ‘With horns or without, with a tail, maybe cloven-hoofed, maybe an evil spirit, maybe an ordinary looking blonde woman possessed by Satan’s essence.’

‘But he’s still Satan,’ my philosophical Tony said, puffing on Golden Virginia tobacco and fogging up the Ambo with manly smoke. It didn’t smell like sulphur, but you never know.

‘Always the same,’ I agreed, ‘always with the same purpose – to corrupt and corrode, always with disciples.’

‘Oh, I see.’ He carefully stubbed his cigarette out on the back of his tobacco tin and put it in his pocket. One of us, it seemed, remembered we were in a petrol station. ‘So he ain’t what he’s called. He’s what he does.’

I was suddenly too tired even to nod.

He said, ‘So you’re saying it’s the same with god? Pretty’s god and my god are the same cos they’re good and their disciples are good even if they’re called Gurus. You’re very easy to talk to for a nun.’

Except he wasn’t talking to a nun – he wasn’t even talking to me. He was talking to himself. No wonder he thought it was an easy conversation.

I said, ‘Where have they taken Connor?’ I thought it was politic to look as if I cared even though the poor little chap was an unbearable burden.

‘They took him to Mum’s. That was her with Lance.’

Tiny Gamma, tiny Mum, huge sons – no wonder the women of the family had to be tough as rhino hide.

‘Mum knows what to do,’ Tony went on with the blithe confidence of a child with a strong mother. ‘Plus she’s got all the baby kit in for our Meadow’s three. We’re well sorted for this kinda thing – better than you, leastways. What were you going to do with him?’

Good question; no answer. I said, ‘He could sleep at the convent, but I thought, looking at him, he needs a doctor or a social worker.’

‘Well he won’t get no social worker from our family. Can’t abide ’em.’

‘But he’s starving.’

‘Mum’ll feed him.’

‘And he looks as if he’s been knocked about.’

‘Yeah, well you can’t undo that in a hurry.’

‘No. But Social Services could make sure he wasn’t mistreated any more.’

‘Don’t you believe it,’ Tony said. ‘Nine times out of ten they give the poor little tyke straight back to the family. You should see what I see every day with our neighbours. There was this one family in our block – about as bad as

Connor's – and Gamma and Mum sort of ran a drop-in centre for the kids. They still send Christmas cards. They know, like as not, they wouldn't of made it otherwise.'

'I don't think our convent's equipped for direct action.' I knew, sure as eggs, that I wasn't.

'Just don't give him to the social wankers or Mum and Gamma will hunt you down and kill you.' He smiled his sturdy smile.

Mrs Gamma Dora peered in through the Ambo door and said, 'Who'm I gonna kill? Better get off your arses or it'll be you. Tony, get that battery over to Jimmy Singh's – he says you can use his whatsit to see if it holds a firkin' charge.' She pointed a knobbly finger at me, 'You come with me to that god-forsaken shop. I'm gonna make you buy what you need to keep a poor innocent little feller alive for twelve effing hours. I know you got toad pee for brains but I s'pose your heart's in the right place.'

'It's in my chest somewhere, broken and bleeding,' I muttered, because every time I remember the Lord of Lies and Lost Love I want to drive a stake through it to relieve the pressure of misery.

'What you blethering about?'

'I said I've only got six pounds something.'

'You'll have to make it do then, won'tcher?'

'Yes,' I said meekly and followed her to the shop.

Looking at the price of a packet of disposable nappies though I realised that I couldn't afford much more for Connor than a litre of milk and a day-old sandwich.

I panicked, and while Mrs Gamma Dora conferred with Jimmy Singh I swiped the charity collection tin on the counter and slipped out into the night.

Electra and I trundled into the wind down the North Circular Road, blasted and buffeted by the ceaseless London traffic. The smell of frost was in the air and I shivered. We turned into the first side street I saw that had a pub in it. I stuck Honda-man's six quid into the charity tin to make it rattle more enticingly. Then I walked into the public bar. As I held out the tin I noticed that I was collecting for Help the Aged. Help the Indigent Middle-Aged and Her Kidnapped Kiddie would be more accurate but accuracy wasn't on my agenda.

The pub was warm and beery. On the overhead monitor Sky Sports was showing a golf tournament in a green and sunny land. Ignoring it and talking loudly, men were gathered in groups necking their pints as they do just before closing time – faster than usual, and sloppily. I couldn't have timed my raid more perfectly. Warm and relaxed, faced with a shivering nun and a skinny dog, they dug in their pockets and paid up like lambs. Even the landlord stuck a fiver in the tin. The landlord usually turfs me out for begging or refuses to

serve me because I'm a ragged, needy example of what too much booze can do to a social drinker. Normally no one wants to be reminded. That night was different. The habit protected me and allowed me to commit a fraud with impunity.

On my way out I noticed an unattended glass of cider. Cider is not my tippable of choice but if it's strong enough it gets the job done. I lifted the glass and let my long black sleeve cover my hand. Then, bowing my head in humility I slipped out into the dark and searched out the first protective doorway I could find.

I was halfway down the glass before I remembered the Antabuse and registered the fact that I was not throwing up. There was a headache, yes, but it wasn't bad enough to make me vomit. The queasiness stayed constant. I slowed down. Gulping wouldn't help me keep the alcohol where it belonged long enough to seep like loving kindness into my veins and from there into my brain.

I looked at Electra and she looked at me. After a long pause, she said, 'Idiot. You could start afresh with no addiction if you wanted to.'

'One glass of cider won't turn me into an addict.'

'Don't deceive yourself,' she said sadly. 'You're an addict already. You're a card-carrying alcoholic and you know it.'

'How can I be an alcoholic? I haven't had a drink in months.'

'Not for want of trying. You keep taking the risk of up-chucking and the world's worst hangover just to get a little alcohol inside you. A normal person would say, "That's enough." But not you – oh no. If that's not booze-dependency I don't know what is.'

'It isn't booze-dependency. It's just half a glass of cider.' But when I looked down at my hand I saw that it was holding a pint pot which was now as empty as a beggar's pocket.

'See?' Electra said. 'No one kids herself like a woman who wants a drink. Booze makes a filthy liar of you – don't kid yourself about that either.'

'But I'm lonely,' I wailed. 'You won't talk to me unless I've had a drink.'

'Don't you start blaming me for your sins. They're yours and the Devil's.' She shuddered. 'I'm just a dog – I'm not supposed to understand sin. And while I'm on the subject, I'm not supposed to talk either. I communicate directly. You should know what I'm all about by what I do, not by what I say. Your language is a maze and a trap. It means that you don't know the difference between facts, truth and honesty. If I'm just a dog I can't tell you the truth, and I can't tell lies either. I am honest. But you can see that just by looking.'

'Are you saying I'm dishonest?'

'Bingo! You're pretending you aren't an alcoholic, and you're pretending

you're collecting the money to help Connor.'

'Am not.'

'You so are,' she said without a flicker of doubt. 'You're kidding yourself you'll go back to the garage and give the money to Gamma Dora to spend. But you won't. You'll find another pub, and then another and another. And you'll end up in a doorway, just like this one, drinking till you drop. You pretend you care about Connor but you don't. You pretend you love me but I come a long way behind booze on your list. Yes, I call that dishonest.'

'It's true I don't really care about Connor...'

'See, I'm right, aren't I?'

'I haven't finished – I don't know him enough to care properly. But that's not it. It's the situation. It's too big for me. I can't think about it. A neglected, abused boy who's been turned into a little monster – how can I care about that? If I care I'll have to do something, and I don't know what to do.'

'Of course you don't.' Electra shook her head until her ears flapped against her skull. 'So get bladdered and forget all about him. Forget about Kerri Cropper and her misery. Tell yourself she'd probably get over it by tea time. Then you can live with yourself, can't you? You're bottom of the heap so no one needs help or sympathy but you.'

'Why are you so harsh all of a sudden?' I put the empty pint pot on the ground between us and squatted down taking her face between my chilly hands. She yawned her meaty dog yawn and sat down too, looking at me with her serious dog gaze. When a dog looks straight into your eyes like that there is nothing to feel except completely understood. It's quite a scary feeling unless you are a saint, which manifestly I am not. And it would be absolutely excruciating to be so totally understood if you weren't so totally accepted as well. And for all her criticism and harsh words, I never felt Electra wanted to change an inch of me. Social engineering wasn't her game, nor was breaking down and reconstructing people for her own purposes. That is a human characteristic – they practice it in prisons. And bourgeois houses.

I said, 'The effects of this pint of cider won't last forever. Then you'll stop talking to me and I won't know what to do.'

'How dumb are you? No one needs a dog to tell them what to do.'

'Except me,' I said humbly.

She leaned forward to give me a big wet kiss on the mouth and then she shut up. I knew it – a pint of cider was insufficient. I wanted to weep. We'd been apart for so long. And she'd become more Cherry's friend than mine. Cherry just snuck in and took her. I had no say in the matter. I didn't know I was losing her because no one told me. And now she was here, all she had to say was that I was an alcoholic and a liar. Not like her new friend, Miss Self-

Righteous, who didn't keep drink in the house and who knew with absolute certainty how a dog should be treated and how everyone else should behave – just like a prison officer.

And now Electra was judging me by Miss Perfect's standards and finding me lacking.

'I'm not who she thinks I am,' I said to my silent friend. 'She doesn't understand me at all, and nor will you if you take her word for it.' I stood up and a dizzy wave hit me so hard that I staggered.

'From now on,' I said, 'I will prove I'm not what Miss Goody-goody thinks I am.'

I clutched the Help The Aged tin to my unloved chest and left the shelter of the doorway. I thought I'd fall down. I thought I'd honk. I thought I'd go to sleep, like a horse, on my huge feet. But they kept me upright and I staggered back to the Texaco shop, cursing my luck and my unfaithful friend.

'Where you been?' Gamma Dora shouted. 'I thought you'd ran out on us.'

'I borrowed this,' I said to Mr Singh putting the charity tin back on his counter. It was stuffed so full of money that it barely rattled any more. 'Are you watching this?' I asked Electra. 'You were wrong for once. Admit it.'

Of course she didn't reply, but Mr Singh stared at the charity tin in disbelief. He weighed it first in one hand, then in the other. 'What I'm supposed to do with this? I can't be taking money from charity, isn't it?'

'Well, I bleeding can,' Gamma Dora said, snatching it away from him. 'One charity's as good as another, if you ask me. And speaking as one of 'em, the firkin' Aged won't mind if some of their bunce goes to the young for a change.' She fumbled in her bucket-sized bag and produced a kitchen knife which she used to lever the tin open.

Little old ladies, if you ask me, shouldn't be so blatantly handy with enormous knives. Jimmy Singh, who looked to begin with as if he was going to argue, wisely folded his arms and kept his mouth shut while watching her count.

'I'll be smoked and kippered!' she said, looking at me for the first time without contempt. 'Quite the little money-maker, ain'tcher?'

'It's the habit,' I said. 'I mean, the calling.'

But she wasn't listening. She was on the phone to her daughter. She said, 'How you doing with little Stinky? Is he? Well that's good. What've you got to complain about? Sleep's good – it's the only time they behave their firkin' selves.'

'Oy, cloth ears,' she said to me. 'Yeah, you. Who's the Sisters of Sweet Charity?'

'Pardon me?' I spoke with all the dignity I could muster. But my heart hit

my boots with a thud. Could Pierre and Smister have been that stupid?

‘She heard on local radio that a kiddie was abducted by the Sisters of Sweet Charity.’

They *were* that stupid. It was Smister’s idea of a joke.

‘I’ve never heard of them,’ I said, furrowing my brow.

‘Sweet Charity, perhaps a musical, innit?’ Mr Singh said.

‘No firkin’ shit on a shoe nail it’s a frigging musical!’ said Gamma Dora glaring at me. ‘And who’re you, when you’re at home?’

‘Me?’

‘Yeah, you, Sister Poop-for-brains.’

‘I say, steady on. Holy orders, innit?’

‘Holy orders, my wrinkly old aunt! Who are you really?’

‘Angela Mary,’ I said, because it’s always best to incorporate a little truth in your whoppers. It’s easier to remember and it makes you feel better.

The names my mother gave me were Angela and May. It’s the cops who think I’m Angela Mary. On the street I’m known as Lady Bag or The Mad Old Bat with a Dog. But I didn’t think that’d impress Gamma Dora much. So I said, ‘Sister Angela Mary from the Order of the Poor Franciscans. St Francis loved the animals, and that’s why we rescue dogs too.’ I looked at Electra, but she was lying exhausted on the floor at my feet. I wished I could lie down beside her.

Gamma Dora’s grizzly eyebrows were twitching in disbelief so I hurried on, ‘We have a special interest in racing dogs that’re past their prime. Did you know that they’re killed and then fed to the other dogs in the same kennel?’ I don’t think the last bit can possibly be true but it sounded suitably brutal.

‘Do you abduct them like you do with kiddies?’

‘They’re bought or donated,’ I said firmly.

‘I hope little boy not bought or donated,’ Mr Singh said.

‘Sometimes, if the need is great enough, we’re asked to take a child into respite care until a proper home can be found. It’s true that we’re better equipped to look after dogs.’

Gamma Dora’s laugh, fittingly, was like a mastiff’s bark. She yelled into her phone, ‘Don’t wake the stinky little bugger up. Keep him overnight. There’s enough dosh in the kitty to choke a camel. Don’t effing worry about it. The “nun” won’t give us any bover.’

She divided the charity cash in half and then she halved one of the halves. The one quarter went back in the tin on Mr Singh’s counter. The three quarters went into her tote-bag. Then she pounced on the shelves like a jackal on a carcass. She took sweets, fizzy drinks and pies as well as items more suitable for a young child, like disposable nappies, milk, bread and bananas. At the

counter she bought several packs of cigarettes and rolling tobacco.

That was too much. I said, 'The money was for Connor.'

'And then as gotta look after him,' she said giving me the glare that made me understand what had been in front of my face since I first met her – Gamma Dora had been in prison at some time in her life. Not only that – I would've bet the farm on her being a member of the Hard Corps. You can't mistake the challenge in that glare. It shrieks, 'So what're you going to do about it, wussy-face? You strong enough for a dust-up with the likes of me?'

In chokey I always wilted in front of that glare. Tonight was no different – I wilted.

9

Connor In Care

‘Electra needs water,’ I told Gamma Dora.

She took no notice. So I went to Jimmy Singh who was conferring fast and foreign with his behind-the-counter assistant. He pointed me to the toilets at the back.

I said, ‘Where have they taken Connor?’

He raised a hand to make me wait.

I turned back to Gamma Dora. I said, ‘You just told your daughter to keep Connor for the night. Where?’

‘What’sit to you?’

‘Well, actually, he’s supposed to be in my care, not your daughter’s.’

‘Actually, Sister Diddloe, he’s supposed to be in a friggin’ convent being looked after by people who know how. Not in the back of a cold van, filthy and screaming for food, which is where you firkin’ had him. You gonner begrudge the poor little bastard a bit of food and comfort?’

‘No but...’

‘No but what?’

I drew myself up and held the rude rood in both hands. ‘Just who’s abducting whom, Mrs Dora? I only asked where Connor was taken. I’m the person who’s supposed to be responsible for him. Poor, yes; unlucky, yes; but irresponsible, no.’

‘Better late than never, innit?’ Mr Singh put in cheerfully.

‘Responsible?’ Gamma Dora said. ‘Don’t make me choke. You’ve driving a child, falling around loose, in the back of an un-firkin’-roadworthy vehicle with nothing but a dog’s toy to chew on, and you call yourself responsible?’

‘The ambulance used to be roadworthy.’

‘And I used to be an eighteen-year-old beauty,’ Mrs Dora said – which

more or less killed the discussion. But she punished her hi-tech phone severely by punching it with granite thumbs and yelling, 'Lance, get your arse over here – me and Mother firkin' Inferior need a ride.'

It seemed to my wayward brain only seconds before enormous Lance turned up outside the Texaco shop in his Range Rover. He had to lift his gamma into the front seat and I had to lift Electra into the back seat because some cars are simply too tall for human and canine use. Then, ceremoniously, he drove us a hundred yards round the corner to a block of council flats. It was very nearly as ugly as Castle Cropper but better maintained – at least the lift worked and the smell of urine wasn't quite acid enough to make my eyes water.

But Mama Misha's flat was a revelation. She had the best and biggest of everything. A wall-mounted 50-inch screen dominated a small living room stuffed with man-sized leather furniture. Shelves groaned under Royal memorabilia and hundreds of china figurines. Curtains and wallpaper were jungles of warring fruit and flowers. The shag pile was deep enough to lose your shoes in. On top of that, she had three fat corgis clamouring for attention. They were called Diana, Wills and Harry, and were spoken to with cooing affection.

'Come with me,' Misha said.

I followed her into a bedroom, leaving Electra cornered by the three corgis. Connor was fast asleep in the smallest of three small beds. He was still clinging for dear life to the squeaky chicken but at rest he looked almost human.

'I put a couple of spoonfuls of cough syrup in his food,' she told me, 'and a tot of rum in his juice. He was so worked up he could hardly eat for screaming, let alone sleep. Know what? I don't care if the Sisters of Sweet Charity did bleeding abduct him. He needs abducting. He's got cigarette burns on his hands and feet, where he ain't bruised, did you know that?'

I shook my head. Looking down at the toasty brown face with its clouds of bruises around the ears and eyes, I almost failed to notice that his head had been shaved.

Misha saw me noticing and said, 'He was crawling with nits and lice. He wouldn't let me wash his hair or comb them out so I had to shave him after he went to sleep. I couldn't bleeding let him put that head on pillows my grandkids use, now could I?'

I shook my head. Shaved and drugged, pacified with alcohol and chocolate, Connor was probably having the best night of his sorry life. Who was I to criticise? But it did make me wonder what the Sisters of Sweet Charity, aka Pierre and Smister, thought they were doing. They'd said they were going to take pictures of him through the letterbox and embarrass the

Social Services into taking action. That, for them, seemed like a sensible plan. What made them change their minds? If indeed they had functioning minds to change.

‘You probably don’t approve of the rum,’ Misha said.

‘I approve of anything that that gets him through the night,’ I told her.

‘I know nuns don’t bleedin’ drink.’

‘Yes we do,’ I said, glad to tell the truth. ‘Red wine. May I use your bathroom?’ I was hoping she hadn’t used up all the cough syrup on Connor.

She pointed me to the bathroom which just about contained a wall-to-wall plus-sized bath and, oh miracle, a huge, fully stocked medicine cabinet. I was able to slurp on cough syrup and stash an unopened package of diazepam down my cleavage as well as having a wee and a wash. Both of which were sorely needed. In the enormous top-lit mirror I looked exhausted, bedraggled and demented. I hid the joke Jesus and straightened my wimple, pulling it a bit further forward so that my face was more in shadow. There wasn’t much else I could do except rinse my mouth and teeth with Misha’s excruciatingly painful mouthwash.

In the kitchen I found Electra, Diana, Wills and Harry tucking into giant portions of the best dogfood money could buy.

Electra looked up at me and said with her mouth full, ‘If you ask them nicely, do you think they’d abduct me too?’

‘No one’s abducting anyone,’ I said firmly.

‘I should think firkin’ not,’ Gamma Dora said. ‘I told you, my Misha knows more about looking after kiddies and dogs than all you holy firkin’ rollers will in ten lifetimes. What did you think – we were running a paedophile ring?’

‘I had to make sure.’

‘Course you bleeding did.’ Mama Misha handed Gamma Dora a pint of gin and tonic. Lance wandered in and was handed a chilled can of lager. She gave me a mug of tea. I could’ve killed her.

‘So I’m keeping the poor little sod till morning,’ she went on. ‘Thanks for all the supplies, by the by. He’ll need everything he can get. I know you’re in holy orders or what-bleedin’-ever, but I got to say something – I hope I’m shot in the effing head if I don’t. You can’t give the little sucker back to the family. No way. No how. Not bleedin’ ever.’

Right then and there I decided to leave Connor with Gamma Dora, Mama Misha, Tony and Lance. There was no way on earth I could look after him. And how insane would it be to leave him with Pierre or Smister? Self-righteous Cherry would give him straight back to his owners.

‘Hold on there,’ Electra said, leaving her empty bowl and resting her head against my thigh. ‘You can’t abandon him with strangers.’

'I'm a stranger to him too. He doesn't know me. He doesn't even know his mother.'

'So how come he ends up in the back of your van?' Lance asked.

I stroked Electra's head, and said, 'Hush.' She always confuses people when we're in company.

'What do you mean he doesn't know his own bleedin' mother?' Misha asked.

'She's in prison.' I spoke directly to Gamma Dora because I thought she'd understand me perfectly. 'Connor was left with his mum's mum. But this grandma has a boyfriend who apparently doesn't like mixed-race babies.'

'A grandmother did that to him?' Lance said, horrified.

'Fuck that,' Gamma Dora said on behalf of grandmothers and great-grandmothers everywhere. 'Still, I s'pose you're never too old to make a twat of yourself over some bastard bloke.'

'S'pose not,' Misha said, almost laughing.

'But I'm the only one suffers from my mistakes,' Gamma Dora went on. 'I never ever firkin' took it out on none of you lot.'

'You're too young to remember Uncle Carbuncle,' Misha said to Lance.

'So let's firkin' leave it that way,' Gamma Dora shouted. 'Lance, phone your brother. The sooner we can get the effing Sister on the road the sooner we can get back to normal.'

I got up. 'Before you ask,' I said, 'I'm going to walk my dog. She's eaten two meals tonight.'

'Good idea,' Misha said. 'You can take my three while you're at it.'

'But...' I said

But there was no arguing and before I could formulate a cogent protest I was given two blue leather leads and a pink one. The three corgis wore little harnesses and little fleecy coats. Electra stared at them, astonished. All she was wearing was a pretty silver-grey silk scarf with blue and violet flowers on it – courtesy of Smister of course.

I walked my canine charges, with many stops on the way, back to the garage. The Ambo sat next to the air dispenser like a squatter in suburbia. Neither Jimmy Singh nor Tony was there. The woman behind the counter in the shop claimed to know nothing and understand even less. But she pointed to a sign which said 'No Dogs Allowed' and sternly declaimed in perfect North London, 'No four dogs allowed on premises, innit.'

'But you sell dogfood,' I protested.

'Only to human beans,' she said flatly.

Defeated, I went to the Ambo. There was still no battery where a battery should be.

The back smelled comfortably of Tony's Golden Virginia. I lifted Wills, Harry and Diana in and they crowded into Electra's bed and fell asleep. Electra didn't mind. She hopped onto the bunk and lay down too.

I found my old backpack, two pairs of track bottoms and some scraggly old t-shirts and sweaters. Then I took a diazepam and sat down next to Electra.

'Wake up,' I said. 'What shall I wear?' She's a girl dog so she should know these things.

'Be quiet,' she said. 'The Royal Ones are trying to sleep.'

'They're council house dogs.'

'They come from a long line of Welsh Queens and Sorcerers. They are what they are, not where they live.'

'Same as you, then.'

'Same as you too – only I don't see much of a pedigree or a lot of magic when I look your way.' She sniffed my fingertips for the scent of royalty and shook her head.

'I might've known you'd criticise. I only want to know what to wear.'

'No you don't. You're asking a much more profound question than that; you want to know the ethical ramifications of continuing to dress as a moral, virtuous, honest woman.'

'Actually,' I said, 'I'm more concerned with financial and legal ramifications. It seems I can make way more dosh dressed as a nun. But is it legal? I mean, could I be done for obtaining money by false pretences?'

'How would I know?' She got up to stretch. 'But asking for money, or love for that matter, by pretending to be more deserving than you are is ethically wrong.'

'You even *sound* like a nun's dog now. Where does this moral judgement come from all of a sudden? I thought we always just did what we did to get by.'

'I'm not talking about religious morality, idiot.' She leaned against me in a quite friendly way. 'I'm talking about the questions you should ask yourself. Like who will I hurt if I act this way or that? What will be the consequences?'

'I wish Pierre and Smister had asked those questions before they snatched Connor.'

'Me too. He's a very disturbed little boy. He needs the love of a good dog.'

'I'm afraid he'd mistreat a good dog.'

'Me too,' she said again. 'It'd have to be a dog bigger and faster than him – one who wouldn't mind administering a reproving nip if he got out of control.'

'Not you, then?'

'Are you insane? Oops, silly question – you just asked a dog what to wear.'

The sky was still as dank and dark as my heart and the forecourt was

deserted. I put on a layer of my old clothes under the habit in case I got cold or needed a quick change. I looked as eccentric as ever and a bit chunkier.

I gathered up the corgis' leads, called to Electra, and hit the road.

The corgis seemed to know where they were going. It wasn't where I wanted to go. If I took them back home I'd be double-teamed by Gamma Dora and Misha and forced to take responsibility for a shaven-headed damaged monstrosity of a child. I couldn't do that. Believe me, I can't. Look at me. See me. I can hardly take care of myself and Electra.

'Be a grownup,' Electra advised. 'Take charge.'

But I was having too much trouble imposing my will on the corgis. Eventually Electra succeeded in leading them away from their home block and we walked through the night.

Half an hour later we found ourselves outside Little Miss Perfect's house. The lights were all out and the occupants were in bed so I crept around to the back wondering if I could wake Smister by throwing a corgi at his window.

10

Emotional Blackmail

‘What in fuck’s name do you think you’re doing?’ Smister whispered when he opened the kitchen door. He was wearing ivory satin lounging pyjamas and his hair was artfully dishevelled.

‘That was my question,’ I whispered back. ‘You kidnapped a child – hardly a rational act.’

Electra slipped past us into the kitchen to drink from the stainless steel bowl the Ice Queen had provided for her. I dropped the corgis’ leads and let them follow.

Smister said, ‘You kidnapped the kidnapped child too. Hardly a rational act either. Cherry’s off her tits pissed with us, Pierre’s doing his cobblers and what’s with all the corgis?’

I ignored the question. ‘I was reclaiming Electra. I didn’t know you’d stashed Connor in the back of the Ambo.’

‘And that’s the other thing Cherry’s off her tits about. If you ask me she was more freaked about the dog than the kid.’

‘Tough shit,’ I said. ‘Electra’s my dog.’

‘You’ve no idea what me and Pierre had to give up to stop her from going to the cops. He’s had to promise to take her to New York instead of performing in the Parade of the Super Tramps which we always do together. Always. She booked the tickets on line straight away so he can’t get out of it.’

‘Well, poor little you. Here’s me crying for your disappointment. What did you think you were doing, snatching Connor?’

‘We couldn’t help ourselves. I stuck Pierre’s phone through the letter box to take a picture – like we said we would – but the little brute snatched it away and bit my thumb. We couldn’t leave his phone there so Pierre had to break the door down to get it back. And then we saw the state of the kid. Besides

which, we couldn't just leave him there with no front door, now could we?'

'You could've done something sensible like take him to a hospital.'

'Don't you dare lecture me about "sensible". What've you done except exchange the little psycho for three corgis?'

'For your information, I'm taking them home. But I'm in a real bind about Connor. He's being looked after at present, but your errand of mercy was reported on local radio. Did you have to call yourselves Sisters of Sweet Charity? Could you be more obviously phoney?'

'We got yelled at by an underage ho. It was the best I could do.'

'Well you've got to do better,' I said. 'I'm in a jam and Connor is too, and you've got to do something right for a change.'

'It's your problem now. You stole the Ambo and Electra so you ain't welcome here any more. And I'm on probation for being a bad influence on darling Pierre.'

'What about Pierre?' Pierre said, switching on the kitchen light. He took one horrified look at me, Electra and the three extra dogs and promptly closed the kitchen door.

Smister opened it again and hauled him inside.

'Gimme a break, guys,' he hissed. 'What're you trying to do – get me killed?'

'This is as much your crap as mine,' Smister hissed back.

'You got me into this,' I whispered. 'The least you can do is help me out.'

'*You got us into this,*' Pierre said.

'Humans,' Electra said to the corgis, 'always blaming one another. No wonder there are so many wars. And who suffers, I ask you? Kids and dogs.'

'Children should be used to suffering,' I said. 'They're bottom of the human food chain. Everyone's bigger and stronger than them.'

'That's emotional blackmail,' Smister said.

'See?' Electra said to the corgis. 'Human kindness has a lot to learn from canine kindness.'

Harry sat up and scratched behind his ear and the other two copied him.

'Shish,' I said to Electra.

'She's hammered,' Pierre said to Smister. 'How'd she pull that trick – dressed as a nun?'

'Raw talent,' Smister said to Pierre.

'Shut up, all of you,' I said. 'I need you two to nun up again. We have to get the Ambo off the Texaco forecourt, pick up Connor from Mama Misha and Gamma Dora and take him to Casualty at some hospital or other.' It was the only way I could see out of the manure I was in.

'Don't tell me to shut up,' Smister and Electra said together.

‘Where did you leave the ambulance?’ Pierre said.

‘Who’s going to hospital?’ asked Cherry, opening the kitchen door.

‘Oh shit, shark attack,’ I said.

‘It’s her fault,’ Smister said, jerking his bitten thumb at me.

‘Honey, you’re awake,’ Pierre said. And if you haven’t seen a nineteen-stone motor-mechanic look nervous as hell, let me tell you, it’s a sight to see.

Cherry said, ‘I told you both, that alky never sets foot in my house again.’ She was wearing a tastefully sexy ashes of roses nightie. She stooped to pat Electra, showing more fake-tanned cleavage than I ever wanted to see.

‘Who’re these little guys?’ Pierre said quickly as if he was catching sight of the corgis for the first time.

‘Wills, Harry and Diana,’ I said.

‘Well halloo,’ Cherry cooed, crouching to pet them too. They accepted her with dignity but without warmth as if they knew her chilly nature just by the smell of her hand. They rose in my estimation. If Pierre had the instinct of a dog, or even a dog’s sense of smell, we’d never have walked into this mess.

There was a moment of silence when nobody seemed to know where to begin. Then Cherry said, ‘The dogs can stay but she goes. Now. And I don’t care what happens to the little boy as long as it isn’t in my house.’

Almost simultaneously Pierre said, ‘Honey, I know it isn’t your responsibility, but I guess it is ours.’ And Smister said, ‘It wasn’t my doing, honest. Please don’t chuck me out – I’ve nowhere else to go.’ He was afraid of her – really afraid. Electra wandered over to him and nudged his hand. She can love anyone, forgive anyone, so it’s worth repeating – she’s a better bitch than I am.

I clicked my tongue and she came to me. I said, ‘Don’t leave my side.’

She said, ‘I don’t know what your quarrel is with Cherry, but she looks after me. Isn’t that in her favour?’

‘Even Hitler liked dogs, so I’m told.’

‘Are you talking to me?’ Cherry said.

‘I’m talking to my dog,’ I said. ‘And don’t worry, we’re going. I just thought the guys might like to help me sort out the mess they made. Besides, I have to take the corgis home. They’ll be missed.’

‘Where did they come from?’ Pierre asked. ‘And where is Connor?’

‘Does it matter?’ Cherry said. ‘As long as he isn’t here.’

Neither Pierre nor Smister said anything to this. So I said, ‘I know the English care more about dogs than children, but even so, aren’t you being scarily cold-hearted?’

‘Don’t you dare call me cold,’ Cherry said. ‘That child needs professional help. Bringing him here did more harm than good and it put all of us in

danger...’

‘Exactly, honey,’ Pierre cut in. ‘But the whole chain of events was accidental – nobody’s fault.’

‘The little bugger bit me,’ Smister complained.

‘Whose idea was it to dress up as nuns?’ Cherry asked.

Pierre ducked his head. ‘It’s a very rough neighbourhood. We needed some sort of disguise.’

‘You can’t judge us by what *she* looks like.’ Smister pointed at me. ‘And don’t blame us that she’s here. We didn’t invite her.’

‘I’m going.’ I was disgusted with both of them for trying to placate such a cold-hearted woman. Maybe she was shit-hot in bed and that was the source of her power.

‘You aren’t taking Electra,’ Cherry said, advancing on me.

‘She’s my dog,’ I said. ‘Where I go she goes. Lump it.’

‘I’ll call the police. They’ll put you back inside.’

‘Lend me your phone,’ I said to Pierre. ‘I’ll lay counter-charges. You’re trying to steal four valuable pedigree dogs.’

‘Thank you,’ Electra said simply. The Royal Ones took the compliment as their due. I felt elated. I was reclaiming power. Maybe it was the diazepam but I suddenly felt I’d spent long enough at the mercy of the Devil and all his minions. It was time to fight back.

Cherry Ice looked as if she was going to nut me. Pierre put his arms around her. ‘Honee,’ he said in a tone of voice which made me want to boot my guts up without the help of Antabuse.

‘Honee,’ he said, ‘you’re absolutely right about everything. And I’m wrong. I’ve been a damn fool. But this is our mess and we should all clean up our own messes, right? And we can’t get the cops in – you agreed. Why don’t you go on back to bed where it’s warm and snugly, and I swear this’ll be straight by morning.’

‘You’ll make her go away?’ She cuddled up to his enormous chest like a little girl to her daddy. ‘But I want to keep Electra.’

My guts spasmed again.

‘I swear.’ He made a ferocious face at me over her head.

‘I trust you,’ she said in her sick-making girly voice, and with that she toddled off to bed – pausing only to give me a cold triumphant smirk.

Oh what I wouldn’t have given to kick her manipulative arse! My foot ached with frustrated desire.

‘Momster!’ Smister planted himself between me and the door. ‘Give it up. You’ve lost. Think about someone else’s needs for a change. I’m cold and tired and I think the little freak’s given me rabies or gangrene.’ He examined the

invisible wound on his thumb.

Pierre said, 'No. We gotta do this thing. She's right; we gotta take him to A and E. We can't leave him with strangers.'

So I told them how the Ambo died in the Texaco forecourt and about Gamma Dora and Mama Misha. I told them about Lance, Tony, Jimmy Singh and the new battery.

'You made enough dosh to pay for everything?' Smister exclaimed. 'And a new battery?'

'It won't be new,' Pierre said moodily. He was keeping an eye on the kitchen door as if he could still see Cherry's retreating rear. He looked older and tired but no wiser.

11

In Which I Save A Life

Three nuns and four dogs arrived at Misha's door just as Lance and Tony were leaving.

'Where've you been?' Tony said. 'Mum's doing her nut.'

'Reinforcements,' I said. The diazepam was wearing off, Electra wouldn't speak to me, and all I wanted to do was lie down and sleep.

'Lie down and die,' the Devil whispered in my ear. 'It's just a long and peaceful sleep. Go on. You know you want to.'

'What you bleedin' done to my darlings?' Misha flew out of the door and gathered the Royal Ones up in her arms.

'Gawd's wrinkly old scrotum, more firkin' silly sisters,' said Gamma Dora. 'We thought you'd gone AWOL.'

'Sister Angela Mary sent for us,' Smister said piously. 'We thank you for your charity.'

'Charity be firked,' Gamma Dora said. 'We ain't giving the money back. Don't even think about it. We earned it.'

'We wouldn't want you to be out of pocket,' Pierre murmured gently. 'But your true reward will be spiritual.'

'Not if I can firkin' help it,' Gamma Dora gave him her combative foggy stare. 'I want mine firkin' now.'

'You already had yours,' I said, too tired to be nunly.

Oh my mind – my piss-piddle cracked bent scooped-out mind. Everyone's talking at once and they aren't actually saying what's coming out of their mouths.

Smister's mouth says, 'Charity,' but his real voice says 'Look how pretty I am. Be charmed and don't hurt me.'

'Gimme what's mine,' says Gamma Dora's mouth. Meaning: 'Gimme

everything. I won't be satisfied till I got all yours too.'

Misha mouths, 'My dogs,' but what I hear is, 'My babies.'

'We should take Connor now,' Pierre says with his mouth. 'Lighter diction,' goes his mind, 'don't talk higher, talk lighter. Feel holy. What would Julie Andrews do?'

Satan says, 'There's too much noise. You're tired, you haven't eaten or slept. Jump off the balcony. That will solve everything.'

But when I looked around I realised that there was no balcony. This was Misha's block, not Castle Cropper with its outside walkways. Also – and this was the loopy bit – I was walking out of the main entrance, turning left and leaving all the fuss and fighting behind. My hand, of its own accord, felt for Electra's slender skull and soft ears and there she was, walking silently beside me.

'Plan B,' said Satan, 'chuck yourself under a bus. It would have the added benefit of snarling up morning traffic for hours.'

'Too messy,' I said. 'And what about Electra? If I'm gone Chilly Cherry will take her for sure.'

'Cherry's going to have her anyway,' Satan smirked. 'What Cherry wants Cherry gets. I make sure of that. She's under my protection, in case you hadn't guessed. I look after my own.'

'So do I,' I said. 'Electra's my own. Not yours and certainly not Miss Self-Righteous's.'

'Wanna bet?' he said, sniggering. 'I just thought you might like to spare yourself the pain of separation. A little mess now against inevitable pain later. How about it?'

I was standing with my back to the grimy door of a café. A couple of guys in blue overalls and thick parkas stopped and tried to sidle by without pushing me out of the way. One said, 'You look frozen, Sister.'

Behind him I saw a bus, it was a number 666, or it might've been 999 upside down. I can't quite remember because the next thing I knew I was lying in the middle of the road with the bus driver and one of the workmen kneeling on the tarmac beside me. The driver was saying, '... out of nowhere. Is she all right?'

'Dunno mate,' the workman said. 'She's still breathing but she took a hell of a knock.'

'Yes, hell,' I muttered. 'The Devil told me to.' The dark grey dawn, cut through by the dazzle of the bus's headlights, made me feel as if I was in a play. I was isolated in a pool of light, while on the other side of the road traffic roared past without stopping. I turned my head and saw the crumpled remains of a blue bicycle dying by the kerb. My heart broke for it.

‘It wasn’t the Devil,’ the driver said. ‘If you hadn’t done what you done someone could of been killed. I could of killed someone. I could of killed *you*.’

The workman said. ‘I never saw no one move that fast.’

I turned my head again and saw that the bus driver had gone to sit on the kerb next to a skinny man in a spandex cycling suit. His orange helmet rested in his lap and he was nursing a bloody gash on his knee. He was white as a corpse.

He said, ‘She pulled me off of my bike.’

‘Thank your stars she did, mate,’ the workman said.

‘Never, never try to overtake a bus on the inside,’ the driver said. ‘I could of killed you. You should know better.’

‘It’s a cycle lane,’ the cyclist said. He was shaking like a house in an earthquake.

‘Don’t care what it is,’ the driver said. ‘You stay where I can fucking see you.’ He was shaking too.

I struggled to sit up. I was tired. The Devil was right – I needed a long, long sleep. Electra appeared by my side. I tried to cuddle her but my arm wouldn’t move. And then, suddenly, there were Pierre and Smister flying down like flapping ravens. And Tony was saying, ‘What’s she done now?’ And there was a Range Rover sitting skew-whiff in the middle of the road, and traffic piling up and honking.

Smister said, ‘Why is there always this unholy mess wherever you go?’

The cyclist said, ‘She saved my life.’

I started to laugh. ‘Pity I can’t remember a thing about it.’

‘Must’ve had a knock on the noggin,’ the workman said.

‘I could of killed them both,’ said the bus driver looking as sick and pale as the cyclist.

‘Oh I do love a nice bit of chaos,’ said Milord Mixup. ‘But you should be under the bus, not having cosy chats with the driver. You missed an opportunity there.’

Pierre folded his huge hands. ‘Let us all thank god for sparing the lives of our brother and sister.’

‘Amen,’ said Smister, Tony and the bus driver.

‘Hallelujah’ said the cyclist. Someone shoved a mug of tea into his palsied hand. A small crowd from the café had gathered, and the bus passengers were whispering to each other, wondering when it would be suitable to ask if they could resume their journey.

‘Don’t you realise?’ Count Chaos asked. ‘If you took Electra with you Cherry would be thwarted and you could sleep together for all future time?’

‘Hurt Electra?’ I cried. ‘I don’t care if you are the Prince of Darkness. I’ll

never obey you. Never.'

'She's delusional,' Pierre said quickly.

'She thinks she sees the Devil,' Smister said. 'It comes from mortification of the flesh – you know, fasting and, er, scourging.'

'She had a lot to say about the Devil earlier,' Tony said, 'when I came to her for advice. She made a lot of sense.'

Pierre and Smister stared at him in total disbelief.

Again I tried to put my arm around Electra but failed. I said, 'I think I've hurt my arm.'

Gently they hauled me out of the road and into Tony's Range Rover.

'Wait,' yelled a man from the café. 'There's an ambulance coming, and the police. They'll want her story.'

'She won't make a lot of sense,' the cyclist said. 'Not if she's telling everyone the Devil made her save my life when in fact she's an angel of mercy.'

'Angel of arsey,' Smister muttered as he lifted Electra into the back seat beside me. 'How do you do it, Momster? You've only got to sneeze and there's a plague of titanic proportions.'

'Ow!' I replied because all of a sudden my left shoulder stabbed me with steel nails.

Tony started the engine and said, 'Are we taking her to hospital?'

Pierre, who was in the front seat beside him, said, 'We'll pick up our vehicle first, then we'll collect Connor as arranged. We always look after our own. We don't sponge off anyone, even the State.'

'Hey, you're from America,' Tony said. 'How did you get to be a nun over here?'

'Bless you for asking,' Pierre was brimful of warmth and love. 'But we leave our past lives behind when we answer Christ's call.'

That is true too when you answer the Devil's call. I left a life of ethical standards and probity when I followed him, and there was no return. *He* doesn't offer a woman the security of brideship – he takes her from behind and leaves her on her knees, used up and shattered into a million pieces.

'Just give the Devil a rest, why don't you?' Smister said. I didn't realise he could hear me.

Tony said, 'Of course she believes in the Devil. I do too. You've got to if you believe in god.'

'But she doesn't have to talk to him all the time.' Smister dug a vicious elbow into my ribs. He was tiring of the holy role.

12

Complete Fuckupitude In A Garage Forecourt

I could see something was wrong the instant we pulled into the garage forecourt.

The Ambo was still where it had been parked near the air pump, but now dirty grey smoke was pouring from the tail pipe. And someone had spray-painted graffiti in black, yellow, green and red on the side. The lettering was too elaborate to read quickly but eventually I managed to pick out the word 'DÉBRIS'.

'Debris Dior?' Smister asked.

'Débris d'Or,' Pierre said. Maybe growing up in Detroit had given him an advantage when it came to reading graffiti.

'Militant naturists?' Tony tipped his head sideways, trying to make sense of it.

'Naturalists,' Pierre said.

'What's débris d'or?'

I said, 'Perhaps – um – waste gold? In French.' If Pierre could do graffiti I could supply some schoolgirl French. I did once take the Lord of Broken Promises to Paris for a week's holiday. It should've taught me something. 'Broken,' I amended, 'Unwanted, cast aside, of no value, thrown away.'

'What the hell are militant naturists doing with your van?' Tony said. 'I didn't fit a reconditioned battery so that some other bugger could drive off in it. And what the fuck are they using for fuel? Kerosene? They'll nause up the engine something rotten.'

Just as he said the word 'rotten', and as if to answer his question, a bearded guy in a green parka climbed onto the roof of the Ambo with a banner that read, 'SAY NO TO EVIL OIL.' We all managed to read that without much

trouble.

‘Oy,’ Tony yelled, leaning out of his window. ‘What you think you’re doing? That van ain’t yours.’

‘*Et ta soeur!*’ the bearded guy yelled back.

‘What?’

‘Something about your sister, I think,’ I told him.

Tony jumped down from the driver’s seat. ‘What about my sister?’ he shouted, furious. Pierre and Smister exchanged horrified glances. Smister slithered down in his seat. Pierre gathered his robes around him and descended from the passenger side. He opened the door for me and helped me down too.

‘Talk to the asshole,’ he whispered. ‘Like shit ain’t stinking enough already.’

‘That’s not what Julie Andrews would say.’

‘Are you crazy?’

‘Silly question,’ I muttered. Then I looked up at the scrawny, bearded protestor, puffed up with aggressive self-righteousness. ‘Bonjour,’ I called. ‘*Nous sommes toutes vos soeurs.*’

‘What?’ shouted Tony.

‘*Oh merde,*’ said the protestor.

‘I think I told him we were all his sisters and he said, “Oh shit”.’

‘I’ll shit him.’ Tony growled rolling up his sleeves and revealing his muscular tattooed forearms.

‘*Tante,*’ shouted the protestor, stamping on the roof of the Ambo.

‘He wants his auntie,’ I supplied helpfully.

‘I caught that one,’ Pierre said.

Tante *Débris d’Or* was thin and hippyish. So were the young man and woman who followed her out of the Ambo.

‘Allo,’ said Tante, brushing long tendrils of curling greyish hair out of her eyes. ‘You want somesing?’

‘Yeah – you to get your arses out of the Sisters’ van,’ Tony growled. ‘It ain’t yours.’

‘We have taken into custody this auto,’ Tantie said. ‘It is symbolise the waste and dirt of the evil oil.’ She pointed to the banner and the clots of black smoke. ‘We are acting correctly. We have telephone to the BBC and the Guardian newspaper. You may beat us and keel us but we will not depart.’

‘We’re nuns,’ Pierre said. ‘We ain’t in the beating, keeling business. But we do need our van.’ He too seemed to be running out of holiness.

‘We location ourselves ’ere,’ Tantie went on, ‘for publication on our cause *et aussi* because our CD is *début* and we gig soon.’

‘Omigod, omigod, omigod!’ Smister slid out of the Range Rover and clung

to Pierre's arm. 'Look at him. Did you ever see anyone so utterly lush?'

It wasn't the beardy one who was churning his butter. It was the boy half of the pair I took to be twins. They were slender and childlike with pale complexions and long tawny hair. They had straight noses and straight brows over amber-coloured eyes.

'I'm in love,' breathed Smister.

'Shut the fuck up,' Pierre breathed back. 'You'll get us all busted.'

'I don't give a tinker's toss about your cause,' shouted Tony, who was fixated on the beardy one. 'Bugger off out of that van. And if you say one more word about my sister, I'll come up and deck you.'

'He mean nossing,' Tantie said.

The girl half of the matching set approached Tony and laid her white waiflike hand on his arm. Her eyelashes were as long as spiders' legs. She waved them soothingly. 'Most political,' she told him. 'He hate American oil. He is not insult your sister. He is angry.'

'So am I.' Tony said, sounding soothed. 'Who are you all?'

'I am Sylvie. Zeez are my brozzers – Louis...' she pointed to the beardy one, '... and Zach...' she held out her hand to Smister's latest passion, '... and our Tante Barbette. Togezzar we are Débris d'Or.'

'Zach,' whispered Smister as if he was tasting honey.

'*Comment?*' said Zach.

'Speak English,' commanded Tantie.

'Remember your darling endocrinologist,' I hissed at Smister, 'and stop drooling. You're a nun for fuck's sake.'

'Chaos beyond my wildest dreams,' sniggered Satan.

'What it is,' Pierre began, 'we are from a poor order and that van is our only transport.'

Beardy Louis yelled something incomprehensible from on high.

'What?' yelled Tony.

'Is nozzing,' Sylvie said quickly.

'Remember Harpreet Kaur,' I whispered to Tony because, like Smister he was beginning to look beguiled.

'He does not like religion,' Sylvie explained gently.

'He does not like anysing,' added Tantie. 'He is our activist.'

'Our drummer,' added Zach, as if that explained everything. 'He like to hit things.'

All I ever meant to do was tell Kerri Cropper her kid was okay. Job done. Then, this morning, all I wanted to do was take her kid to an A and E department in the nearest hospital and leave him there so that someone competent could look after him. And I needed the Ambo so that I could have

somewhere to sleep with Electra. Because even though Ms Cherry Self-Righteous had turned out to be an evil troll and the Devil's handmaiden, she was maybe, possibly, probably, a little bit right about Electra being too old for life out on the street.

Satan giggled. 'You're so-o fucked up. I love it – so many baby steps leading you to complete fuckupitude.'

'That isn't even a word,' I said. 'But if you want fuckupitude, I'll give you fuckupitude.'

'Bring it on,' said the Lord of Cruel Laughter.

'Will you just belt up,' Smister muttered. 'Get a grip, woman.'

'Are you two *trying* to blow it?' Pierre stood in front of us blocking us off from the others. 'Bow your heads in shame, and repeat after me... "I need love, love – To ease my mind. I need to find, find – Someone to call mine. But mama said...".'

The three of us bowed our heads and softly recited after Pierre the lyrics to 'Can't Hurry Love'. He was so simple and sincere that it felt to me like a religious experience, but I noticed that Smister was looking sulky and Electra was tired.

Smister said, 'What do they want the damn Ambo for anyway?'

'For their protest,' Pierre said, crossing himself.

'I think they haven't got anywhere to live,' I said to Electra. 'I think they're homeless, just like us, but they're too proud to admit it.'

'Let them have it,' Smister said. 'I'm bored now.'

'Then Electra and I won't have anywhere to live.'

Smister and Pierre exchanged a meaningful glance and I heard Satan whispering to them in a voice so soft that only they could make out the words.

Tony came over and said, 'Sorry to interrupt your devotions, Sisters, but these morons won't budge and Jimmy Singh's wife has called the cops.'

This was not good news to anyone – except, apparently, Débris d'Or.

'They think it's good publicity for their cause,' Tony went on. 'But my family don't deal with the filth, so I phoned Lance and he's bringing Connor straight over.'

'What will your mother and grandma say about that?' I asked.

'We ain't telling them. We think this crap's gone on too long already. Sorry and all that, but you got to sort this yourselves now. The kid needs kosher fostering and like I said we don't do cops.'

Smister looked horrified, but Pierre took the news with impenetrable serenity. He bowed his head and said, 'Thy will be done.'

Tony said, 'It ain't my will. I never wanted this to happen.' He looked shamefaced and awkward. In the background Tantie, Sylvie and Zach were

singing Redemption Song in sweet harmony. My shoulder hammered out the rhythm for them.

‘What have they put in that petrol tank?’ Tony said, distracted again by the black exhaust fumes.

‘Sings like an angel,’ Smister said, distracted again by Zach.

The cops and Connor – a combination that would sink my boat for sure. I’d be back in the chokey before breakfast.

‘Stay here,’ I said to Pierre and Tony.

‘Come with me,’ I said to Smister, grabbing him by the hand.

‘*Allez avec moi,*’ I said to *Débris d’Or*. ‘You need somewhere *avec une douche pour les dames*. Non?’

‘Yes,’ Tantie and Sylvie said in unison and with conviction.

‘What did you say?’ Smister asked.

‘That Zach looks exhausted and needs somewhere dark and quiet to lie down. I said you might lend him your bed for an hour or so.’

‘You’re a genius,’ Smister said, ‘and I take back anything else I ever said about you.’

‘Pierre can deal with the Ambo. He doesn’t need us – we’ll only get in the way.’

We slipped out of the petrol station leaving Tony and Louis to shout at each other and Pierre to mediate. We walked in silence except for my shoulder which was screaming. The diazepam was jammed into my bra and I couldn’t get at it without an un-nunly strip-off. Except for a couple of snatched hours I’d been up all night. I’d saved a life but the Devil wouldn’t leave me alone and my vision was beginning to blur. The cops were coming but all I could think was, ‘This is the last time I ever do a favour for a friend.’ Trouble and pain are the punishments for kindness.

I was better at revenge.

Smister let us into Ms Dog Thief’s house. He seemed quite confident so I assumed he knew what time she left for work. Even besotted as he was with Zach he wouldn’t risk a confrontation with her. I showed Tantie and Sylvie into her pinkie-pink bedroom while Smister took care of Zach. ‘*Restez la,*’ I said, ‘for as long as you want.’

Let Cherry come home and find her house invaded. Let her sort all that out. Electra and I would be long gone. We could reclaim the Ambo, park on a side street and sleep for hours. She’d never find us.

Pierre, Tony and Louis could take Connor to a hospital, couldn’t they? Why should I have to do everything?

I rescued the diazepam from my cleavage, took two, found a packet of pills that promised to beat PMT cramps and washed some of them down with milk

from the fridge. Then I fed Electra a portion of chicken casserole I found in a neat plastic box. I hoped it was Miss Perfect's supper. Electra had eaten three or four suppers during the night. Perhaps it would be enough calories to keep her going for a little longer.

I was ready to hit the road.

Electra said, 'Let me sleep for an hour. You could lie down on the carpet beside me and just rest your eyes. You're beginning to twitch.'

'We need the Ambo.'

'What about the cops?'

'With any luck they'll be gone by the time... '

'When were you ever lucky?' she asked with simple logic.



Just as we arrived at the Texaco forecourt six things happened one on top of another.

Jimmy Sigh appeared in pyjamas and sheepskin bedroom slippers yelling, 'Bugging off all of you, excuse the expression, sisters.'

Lance sailed up in his Range Rover and docked it next to Tony's Range Rover.

Louis Débris d'Or jumped down from the roof of the Ambo and landed a punch on the point of Tony's chin.

Tony fell back against his Range Rover hitting his head against a tail light as he went down.

We all heard the shriek of a police siren approaching down the North Circular Road.

Pierre raised his robes above his knees and scrambled into the driving seat of the Ambo.

That settled it for me. I lifted Electra into the passenger seat and followed her.

'Drive!' I yelled.

Pierre drove.

13

Double Buggeration

How he missed Connor I don't know.

And how had a little kid, addled on cough syrup, managed to climb down from the dizzy height of a Range Rover? All I do know is that Pierre very nearly reversed over him as he stood in the middle of the forecourt, mouth agape with familiar distress, shrieking, while Lance knuckled up on Louis in revenge for his having decked Tony.

Pierre stood on the brake and nearly broke our necks.

'Pick him up!' Pierre shouted.

'No!'

He leaned across me and opened my door. 'You can't leave him to be knocked over.' He pushed and I tumbled out onto the asphalt. I only just had time to haul Electra out after me before Pierre roared away in a cloud of black smoke.

'Fine fucking nun you turned out to be,' I screamed watching my home disappear down the North Circular Road just as a Panda car carrying two huge uniformed cops rolled into the space he'd just vacated.

At least Connor was decently dressed in blue dungarees, a long sleeve tee-shirt and too-big sneakers. I grabbed for his hand. He bit me.

I yelled. He yelled. Electra said, 'How could you forget? He's a biter. If he were a dog they'd put him down.'

'If he were a dog, would you bite him back?'

'Maybe,' she said. 'But don't you dare! You aren't a dog so you don't have the right.'

'Can I slap him then?'

'Not in front of a cop,' she advised gently. She shoved Connor with her nose and he stopped bawling to look at her. She seemed to calm him.

I grabbed the shoulder straps of his dungarees and steered him away from the police car.

The cops, being blokes, were only interested in the fight. Louis wasn't half as burly as Lance and Tony but he fought like a ferret on speed. He was lashing out at anything that moved and it seemed he'd learned a trick or two from Connor because he was using his teeth too.

'Nice one, Louis,' I muttered as I half dragged, half carried Connor away by his straps.

'Stay,' whispered the Devil soothingly. 'This is quality entertainment. You need a good laugh and you're so tired of walking.'

'Come on,' Electra urged. 'Don't dither close to cops. You're too conspicuous.'

I wasn't conspicuous at all. I floated six inches above the tarmac in the middle of the road, horses and mastodons thundering past in both directions, and no one took the slightest scrap of notice. A nun, a dog and a child, all able to slide, skip, float away from the scene of a fracas without anyone having registered their existence, let alone their absence. In the world of fighting men we mattered less than a broken fingernail. Give me a gun, a machete or a crossbow and a hefty dose of testosterone – then tell me how much I matter. Go on. Do it. Only men's violence counts in this world. I have, dragging unwillingly by my side, a violent child. Does anyone care about him? The fact that he is with me, is your answer. We're both medicated to the eyeballs, following a superannuated greyhound, with no particular place to go and no money to get there.

Does anybody care?

Connor's skinny little body is covered in cigarette burns and bruises but Lance and Tony would prefer a scrap on a forecourt to looking after him. Bashing someone is easy compared with child rearing – and so much more rewarding. Maybe I should've got a few licks in myself. Then I'd reap some respect. In chokey I stabbed a woman's face with a plastic fork for some peace and quiet. It worked.

Would the same trick work on a blonde dognapper? If I stabbed her frozen smile with a plastic fork would she leave Electra alone?

Connor is my baby now. The Devil is his father. He's the child I would've conceived with my demon lover that time he tied me with his belt to the dressing table chair, bent over in front of the mirror so he could watch his own disgust and not have to look at my aging, hurting face. He had not yet used up all my money, property and expertise, or he wouldn't have shown me even this cruel affection.

Yes, I had congress with the Lord of Trouser Snakes, and Connor is our ill-

favoured, ill-begotten son. With his shaved head and flapping feet he looks like cancer on legs, or a baby convict – a tiny hard-man from cell block H for Hell.

‘Spawn of Satan?’ Electra said. ‘Now you really sound like a nun. For pity’s sake cross the road – don’t just stand here lollygagging. You’ll get us killed. You may want to die, but I don’t.’

So we crossed two roads. Or maybe we crossed the same road twice. And we walked because walking soothes my pumping aching heart. But it tired Electra, and Connor dragged heavy on my restraining hand. When he was too tired to scream and bite I stopped. I crouched down on the pavement and faced him for the first time. His toasty skin was yellow with fatigue and there were dark circles under his eyes as well as the indigo clouds of bruise. Worst of all were the worry lines. Have you ever seen a toddler with worry lines on his forehead? It’s a spooky sight, a clue to many events you don’t want to think about.

‘Okay,’ I said to Electra, ‘he may not be Satan’s spawn but he isn’t one of god’s children either.’

‘God’s a man – he neglects his children,’ she said, sitting down wearily. ‘But he isn’t your child either. You can’t look after him. You can’t even look after me. I always have to look after you. Why do you think I’m quite content to stay with Cherry?’

‘But I saved your life.’

‘And now you’re killing me.’

‘Don’t exaggerate,’ I said. But she just looked at me with sincere sleepy dog eyes.

An old man with a walking frame stopped in mid-shuffle to say, ‘You’s in trouble here, sister?’

‘The boy’s suffering from haemophilia,’ I said to ward off criticism for the bruises. ‘We were going to the hospital but I seem to have lost my way.’

‘Oh pull the other one,’ Electra said, rolling her eyes tiredly.

‘Turn right at the lights,’ the old man said. ‘Cross at the school, take the next right. You can’t miss it. I’d give you the bus fare meself but I’m waiting on me pension.’

‘Don’t you feel dirty?’ Electra asked, ‘exploiting people’s good intentions. Do you think you deserve a kind man’s charity?’

‘Kindness is given freely,’ I said with revolting piety. ‘No one deserves it.’

‘You said a mouthful.’ The old man crept painfully away. There was no mystery about why he knew the exact route to the hospital.

In the end I hauled Connor into the Accident and Emergency department on my back. His ill-treated little legs wouldn’t take him any further. Fortunately he was too tired to bite my neck and shoulders.

‘You can’t bring that dog in here,’ said a Cherry look-alike wearing a brown uniform and a badge which said, ‘Security’. She completely ignored Connor and the fact that my back and shoulder were contorted with the pain of an injury and from carrying him. I never get credited for my good deeds, even as a nun.

‘God forgive you,’ I said. ‘Help me with him, please.’

‘You have to check in at Reception,’ she said and walked away to interfere with someone else.

I let Connor slide down my back onto a stained brown chair. As he began his weary, dreary wailing I left him and went to Reception. The three women working there were eating slices of chocolate birthday cake. A nun in pain and an abused boy couldn’t possibly compete with cake. I was so fed up that I chanted, ‘Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray the Lord...’ very loudly.

‘You’ll get us busted,’ Electra warned.

‘It’s all right – I can’t remember the words. The Lord’s my shepherd...’

‘No one remembers all the words to that one either,’ she said.

‘All things bright and beautiful,’ I sang, ‘all creatures great and small...’

Electra lay down and closed her eyes.

‘What?’ yelled a receptionist from behind a computer festooned with party-poppers.

‘I told you to take that dog outside,’ said the uniformed Cherry look-alike. ‘And there’s no singing allowed in here.’

‘Fine,’ I said. I was relieved. She told me to go so it was her fault I was going and leaving Connor all by himself. Don’t blame me – I’m only doing what I’m told. I made for the doors. They whooshed open automatically and I was out in the wind again. My shoulder still screamed, but I was not weighed down by Connor any more. He was in a building full of professional carers. He would be cared for. My work for Kerri Cropper was done.

‘Wait,’ Electra said, ‘I’m busting for a pee.’

‘Hurry,’ I said. ‘We need to find somewhere to sleep.’

‘Is that all we need to do?’ She squatted with a blissful look in her eyes.

The hospital was behind me. Ahead was a doorway, a park, a neglected garden, a hidden cranny behind a wall where I could lay my head down.

‘You didn’t even tell them his name,’ she said standing up and placing herself between me and sleep.

‘If they don’t know who he is they can’t give him back to the people who hurt him.’

‘Who are “they”?’ she asked remorselessly. ‘The same ones who’re too busy with birthday cake to help an abused little boy?’

‘There are doctors and nurses in there too. They’ll look after him and make

arrangements.'

'Arrangements? You know for a fact who "arranged" for Connor to live in his grandmother's custody while Kerri was in prison, don't you? She was considered by the "caring" community to be a suitable guardian then. How do you know they won't find someone worse now?'

'I don't care,' I said. 'I can't help any more. You said yourself that I can't even look after you. Don't suddenly expect me to be a responsible citizen – because I'm not. You know I'm not.'

'I do know,' she said sadly. 'But you'll regret it. It's always the stuff you *don't* do that you regret most.'

'You're talking to the woman who gave her life, love and integrity to the Lord of Evil Deeds.'

'Get over yourself,' she said. 'He was just a dishonest man. Isn't it time you stopped making a Greek tragedy out of a banal situation?'

'Your name's Electra,' I retorted. 'Don't you lecture me about Greek tragedies.'

'I'm a dog,' she said tiredly. 'I didn't name myself.'

'We're free,' I said. 'Don't spoil it.'

I don't know if you've noticed, but life is very much like a banana. One minute it's in your hand, and the next it's choking you – the words were hardly out of my mouth when two patrol cars screeched to a stop right in front of me. Out of the first came two cops trying to subdue a struggling, handcuffed Louis Débris d'Or. He was dripping blood from his nose and mouth but the light of righteous anger was still in his eyes.

The other vehicle carried Tony and Lance. Tony was clearly concussed. He sagged between Lance and another cop. Lance had a swollen jaw, a black eye and grazed knuckles. The cops were looking smug – they had apprehended three very dangerous malefactors.

'Sister,' Lance said when he saw me, 'am I glad to see you! Tell them about this dick-brain stealing your van.'

'Oh double buggeration,' I said, folding my hands and humbly lowering my gaze.

'Excuse me?' said one of the cops.

'Double purgation,' I explained. 'I'm praying for...'

'Okay,' he said. 'I thought you said something else.'

'What?'

'I'd rather not say. This, er, gentleman says he knows you and that he was assisting you with the return of some property.'

I bowed my head. 'He and his brother were most kind. The matter is now concluded.'

‘Not exactly,’ the cop said. ‘Now there’s the small matter of Causing an Affray, ABH and GBH. I’ll need a witness statement from you.’

‘Of course,’ I said. ‘But doesn’t this man need medical attention?’

‘Yeah,’ said Lance. ‘Now. Quick.’

‘I lost my love,’ slurred Tony.

‘*Vive la revolution!*’ yelled Louis, spitting blood.

‘Let’s go.’ The cop who’d spoken to me was beginning to look fed up. ‘You’d better come with us.’

‘My dog...’

‘I feel Pretty,’ sang Tony. ‘I want Pretty.’

‘His girlfriend...’ I began.

‘Shsh,’ Tony said, ‘thassa secret.’

‘Let’s go,’ the cop insisted.

‘What’s a secret?’ Lance asked.

‘Eee ees one beeg stupeed,’ put in Louis, whose timing was perfect.

Tony lunged. Louis laughed. Lance lunged. The cops leaped. Electra jumped out of the way. I went to follow her. Tony swung a wild haymaker. And that’s all I remember.

14

A Nurse And A Screaming Baby

Someone hit me. My mother. My mother hit me. She said, 'This is all your fault. You did this. You're a dirty, dirty girl.' She hit me hard on the side of my head. My ear ached and my teeth rattled.

My bed rattled.

Somebody said, 'It's all my fault.'

Someone else said, 'Take two of these four times a day with food. Get the bandage changed in a couple of days at your nearest drop-in clinic.'

I opened my eyes and looked straight into the face of a cop who was walking backwards.

'Mother?' I mumbled.

He said, 'Hello, Sleeping Beauty's just woke up.'

The first somebody said, 'Don't talk about her like that. She's a nun.'

The second someone said, 'You can't come in here till doctor's been.'

I closed my eyes and then opened them again. The cop was still there.

He said, 'I'll need a statement.'

'I didn't do anything,' I told my mother.

'The man hit you.'

'I don't remember,' I said, although my head was beginning to clear, and I did.

The first somebody said, 'It wasn't a man; it was a bus.'

I said, 'It wasn't a bus, it was my mother.'

'Come again?' said the cop.

I struggled to sit up. The first somebody was a man in a spandex cycling suit. He had an orange helmet under one arm and a huge bandage wrapped around his knee. He held out his hand. 'Fergus,' he said. 'You saved my life.'

'Can you find my dog?' I asked. 'She's called Electra.' We shook hands.

My bed took a sharp left turn and stopped, but my brain seemed to carry on down the corridor. I was surrounded by turquoise pleated curtains.

The second someone was a nurse with a billowing bosom. He said, 'We'll have to take the wimple off. We need to X-ray that head of yours.'

'No,' I said. 'Mother's orders.' I could see the shadow of the cop through the curtains. 'I mean holy orders.'

Fergus poked his head in and said, 'What dog?'

The nurse said, 'I thought they said you came in with a little boy.'

'I need to sleep,' I said.

'I can't let you sleep,' the nurse said. 'It isn't safe after a concussion.'

The cop poked his head through the gap in the curtains and said, 'if this lad's got it right it'll be two concussions – she got hit by a bus earlier.'

The nurse grabbed my wrist. 'Gotta be your lucky day.' He felt around for a pulse. He must've found one because he said, 'Hmm,' and let my hand drop back to my chest.

The cop said, 'When can I talk to her?'

'When the doctor says so.'

'And where's he?'

'She.'

'Comes to something,' the cop muttered, 'when the quacks are all she and the nurses are he.'

'Why?' asked Fergus, who was a lot younger.

'I used to look up to doctors.'

'I used to look up to policemen.' The nurse went to stand, arms akimbo, in front of the cop. 'Go and bother someone else. Better still, go and see what's happening to the baby.'

'What baby?'

'Listening's not one of your strengths, is it?' the nurse said. 'I'll call you when you can talk to, er, talk to...'

'Sister Angela,' Fergus said. 'She's my angel of mercy.'

'I thought you were supposed to be looking for a dog.' The nurse was clearly pissed off with everyone.

'She's a brindle greyhound,' I said. 'Electra. She's a rescue dog – fighting and shouting frighten her.'

'She wouldn't want to work in A and E then.' The nurse drew the curtain closed. Had it been a door he'd have slammed it.

'Okay,' he said once he'd made sure we were alone. 'Sister Angela? I'm a lapsed Catholic – Catholic educated and all that malarkey, and I never saw a nun with a red tracksuit on under her habit.'

'May god forgive you for looking,' I said. 'Please leave, and send a woman

to look after me.'

'I'm all you got for the time being. Also you're my patient, for your sins, which I'm supposing are many and weird. I won't tell on you – not allowed and all that bollocks.'

There's nothing hidden from nurses. They can look up your skirt or down your trousers with impunity.

I sighed. 'I don't remember much.'

'Oh yeah? What about the little boy?'

'What little boy?'

'In reception they said you came in with a little boy.'

'Who?' Well, can you blame me? Double concussion has to be good for something. 'I know I have a dog,' I went on, creasing my brow and looking, I hoped, vague. 'She's a rescue greyhound. Us Franciscan nuns cherish all distressed animals...'

'Last time I looked,' he interrupted, 'Franciscan nuns were called Poor Clares, and if you were one you'd know that. And you would've dedicated your life to poverty, not greyhounds. You're busted, Sister Angela, like a cheap china plate on a Saturday night.'

'My head hurts,' I said. That, at least, was the truth.

'What do you know about the little boy?'

'I told you, I don't know a little boy.'

'You can tell me or you can tell the police. It's serious. He's been badly mistreated and here you are masquerading as a nun. Are you involved?'

'Me?' I was horrified 'I am a nun...'

'They're the worst – them and priests.'

'But nuns don't smoke...'

'Hah!' he crowed triumphantly. 'So you know about the cigarette burns!'

'I heard someone talking in the corridor.'

'You were unconscious in the corridor.'

'Before I opened my eyes.' Well what was I going to do? Tell the truth? Don't make me laugh – some truths are so awful you have to stick to lies. Am I going to tell a nurse, who seems to have some grasp of ethics, that I'd just got out of prison, that I was pretending to be holy for monetary gain, that I'd connived at the kidnap of a child, that I was dependent on alcohol and prescription drugs while in charge of said child, and I was doing my best to palm him off on the National Health Service? It doesn't sound very good when you make a list of all your sins, does it?

I sighed again and said, 'I think I dislocated my shoulder. Can you help?'

'Sit up and face me.' He sighed too. Maybe he had more than me to sigh about. Maybe he was at the end of a long, complicated shift and he really

didn't need a faux nun to piss him off even further. Either way, when I sat up, he stood in front of me and did something indescribably violent to my arm. I shrieked.

'Better?' he asked with a sadistic smile.

When I could speak again I asked for painkillers.

'Not till you've seen the doc and had an X-ray.'

'What about a glass of water?' I wheedled. I wanted to get rid of him long enough to reach the medication lodged in my bra. There was a packet of diazepam with my name on it.

But when he left I had to admit that I could now move my arm without pain. The sadist gives and takes away pain – that's how sadists operate. I know – I loved one once.

I popped a diazepam and crawled down from the bed. I was swimming in turquoise curtains but I beat my way through the waves and out into the corridor. And there I stood wondering which way to turn. I couldn't go back to Reception because that's where the cops would be waiting. But somewhere near the main entrance, if he was a man of his word, spandex-clad Fergus would be waiting with my best friend. I had to find him before the cops found me. And I had to do it before Nurse Ethical-Sadist noticed I'd gone.

Endless curtains, endless corridors. There were used syringes, soiled dressings and suspicious stains on the floor. Corridors interconnected with waiting areas and more corridors. I found a lavatory which looked as if it had suffered a heavy night at the hands of junkies instead of medics. But it was better than nothing. I washed my face and hands, straightened my wimple and drank from the tap. My image in the mirror slid in and out of focus. Even out of focus I looked demented

I left and walked on down the corridor with my head bowed, trying to imitate a nun with her mind on pure things whereas it was actually clamouring for escape and a bottle of red wine. I found myself looking for Electra even though I knew she was outside. I thought I saw a blind monkey with a white stick but it turned out to be an old woman leaning on her drip stand.

Then I saw Connor. He raced towards me – his mouth as wide as a laundry basket. He was screaming. I thought he was an apparition and that he would run right through me. Instead he crashed into my legs and hid himself in my robes.

It was an illusion. It wasn't really happening. Even Connor couldn't be so damaged as to think I was a place of refuge. But there he was, clinging to my robes, trying to bite my leg.

'Shut up!' I hissed. 'You'll get us both in lumber.' When that didn't work I grabbed him and hauled him off me. 'Come and see the nice doggy,' I

whispered. 'You like the nice doggy, don't you? She likes you too, but you've got to SHUT UP.'

I should have been sorry for him but he was endangering me. And he was almost too ugly and too much of a nuisance to pity. How could I say that about a baby? I'm not proud of it but it's true. Connor was awful – he'd soiled his nice new clothes, he stank and he bit. But at the mention of a 'doggy' he calmed down a little and I could lead him by the hand down yet another corridor, looking for a place to park him. Instead, I found a fire exit. Out we went only to find that it was raining.

'Oh perfect,' I said.

'Waaah!' replied Connor.

'Shut up.'

'Waaaah!'

'I don't like this either,' I said. 'But am I crying? No I'm not. Even though things are worse for me than they are for you. Why? Because I'm looking after you. That's why. You aren't looking after anyone.'

The elderly baby said, 'You're lying. You aren't looking after me. You can't wait to get shot of me. I'm barely three years-old, you know, and I've had a crap life. The least you could do is feed me and be a bit more entertaining. It's not like I'm asking for something really difficult – like love.'

'Make your mind up,' I said. 'Either scream or talk. You're doing both at the same time and it's driving me nuts.'

We were in a staff car park. I thought if I turned left and kept turning left every time there was a choice, eventually I'd end up at the front of the building. But it seemed that while I was inside I'd made my way through a maze of wings and extensions.

'You're lost,' the old baby screamed.

'If you can do any better, you lead the way.'

'Are you looking for the entrance?' asked a man in an orange plastic raincoat. He was delivering a bulk load of surgical gloves on a trolley. He pointed back the way we'd come.

'Surgical gloves freak me out, waaah!' yelled Connor.

'Bless you,' I said to the man.

'What do you know about surgical gloves at your age?' I asked Connor.

'Pardon?' said the delivery man.

'Waaah!' said Connor.

We walked. I thought that if we kept turning right every time there was a choice, eventually we'd end up at the front of the building. If left was wrong, right had to be right.

'We're on ground level,' I reasoned. 'A and Es are always on ground level

so that drunks won't kill themselves going up and down stairs.'

'You think I don't know about drunks and druggies?' screamed the ancient toddler. 'My mum and dad are dealers. My auntie's a crack whore, and my nan's on the piss morning, noon and night. If you ever saw that woman arseholed you'd never want to take another sip of red wine in your life. She's about your age, you know.'

'What's age got to do with it?'

'You should know better. You should be setting an example.'

'That's ageism,' I crowed. 'Why should we be better than anyone else?'

'Someone's got to be.'

'Don't you dedicate your life to goodness?' asked a woman holding a plastic folder over her head as protection from the rain.

'To poverty, actually. Except when we have to feed these little ones.'

'Bollocks,' screamed the little one.

'I'd give you something but I don't want to get my hair wet.' She hurried away.

'More bollocks,' the little one screamed even louder. 'I'm wet and uncomfortable and if you can't even shelter me from the rain, what fucking use are you?'

'I'm no use at all, you stupid baby. I keep telling everyone that. And yet here you are, by your own choice.'

'Waaah!' said Connor. 'You promised me a doggy.'

'I'm trying, but your constant screaming is making it tough work.'

'He doesn't understand you.' The woman who didn't want to get her hair wet had returned protected by a golfing umbrella. 'He's only a baby. Here...' She handed me a ten pound note. 'I felt so mean leaving you like that. I know how difficult it is, trying to be good. I expect even nuns have to try really hard. No one's born good. It has to be a minute-by-minute choice.'

She didn't wait to be thanked. She stuck the huge umbrella into my hand and scurried away. The rain ate her up.

'I want to go with her! Waaah!'

'Don't let me keep you!'

'That ten pounds is for me. I want it.'

'There's the doggy.' I pointed.

Just like a dog himself, Connor looked at my finger instead of what I was pointing at. I don't care how intelligent Electra claims to be – looking at a finger isn't clever. Nor is pointing a finger in front of a known biter.

'Waaah!' I yelled. This time he drew blood.

Electra and Fergus were sheltering under the overhang by the front entrance. At the sound of my voice she got up, stretched and came trotting

over. Her ears were pricked and her tail was waving hello. Clearly she'd had a sleep and was feeling better.

I'm lost without her. I said, 'Help me. I can't cope. I've been so lonely.'

'Hello to you too,' she said. 'I thought you were getting rid of the baby.'

'I can't. I tried. He keeps turning up.'

'Stop crying. You're making a show of us.'

'He bit me.'

'Well you abandoned him. Now you're quits.'

Connor greeted her quite gently. She sniffed his dungarees and wrinkled her nose.

'Hi.' Fergus limped over to join us and we all stood under the huge umbrella.

'Are you okay now?' he asked. 'Have they discharged you? Who's the kid? I thought you couldn't remember...'

'I can't. But he seems to remember me.' I wiped my eyes on my long black sleeve.

Now that we'd found Electra Connor had stopped screaming and was stuffing four fingers in his mouth instead. I was hoping he might give himself a nip.

'That's the way to treat a baby,' Satan said, sniggering. 'I wholeheartedly approve.'

'I was wondering when you'd show up.'

'I couldn't leave,' Fergus said. 'You asked me to look after your dog. Have you given your statement to the police? Can we go now?'

I'd forgotten the cops. I looked over to the loading bays where they'd illegally parked their cars. The cars were still there. The cops were probably in the reception area. I couldn't shove Connor through the automatic doors and bugger off. I nearly started weeping again.

'Connor needs chocolate,' I said, to distract attention.

'Too right,' said Connor, sucking loudly on his fingers.

'Great idea,' said the Devil. 'He'll be toothless like you by the time he's five.'

'A growing boy need's meat – just like an old greyhound.'

'My girlfriend's waiting for me in the car park,' Fergus said. 'Can we give you a lift somewhere?'

Satan started giggling again. 'Who's he kidding? A faux nun, a decrepit dog and a stinky baby – his girlfriend's going to love that.'

The Prince of Paranoia was right as usual. Fergus's girlfriend, Jade, was waiting in a tidy little Honda which smelled of pine air freshener. Or it did before we climbed aboard. But she was game. She said, 'Thanks so much for

saving Fergus. No one's safe, cycling in London traffic. I've said that a thousand times, haven't I?'

'You have indeed,' he said wearily.

'And I was right, wasn't I?'

'You were indeed.'

There she was – another pretty-in-pink girlfriend, who was always right. Co-incidence? I think not. I think they're sisters – two daughters of self-righteous Satan.

'You'd better hold that baby on your lap,' she said, confirming my suspicion. 'He's too small for a seat belt.'

'I'm not sitting on you!' Connor shrieked.

'He doesn't do laps,' I said. 'You'll just have to drive carefully.'

'Why do you think he doesn't like sitting on people?' Count Cruelty was laughing uncontrollably.

'I don't want to think about it.'

'Nor do I,' said Fergus.

'Nobody wants to think about it,' Connor said. 'Why do you think I'm in this mess?'

'Because you pooped yourself,' replied Count Cruelty.

'Waaah!'

'There are toffees in the glove box.' Jade had barely known Connor for two minutes and already she sounded desperate.

Fergus said, 'Won't he choke?'

'I don't care,' she said. 'Just give him a fricking toffee.' She'd begun to drive too fast over the car park speed bumps. I swear that every time Connor bounced I could hear him squelch.

Fergus handed me a bag of toffees and I shoved one in Connor's gob. He shut up.

'He's only a baby,' Fergus said sounding worried.

'He's an unhappy baby,' I said. 'Unhappy babies hurt people.'

'And dogs,' Electra said.

'Which way are we going?' Jade said. We'd come to the car park exit.

I didn't know. Satan whispered Cherry's address in my ear and before I could think I repeated it to Jade. My head felt light and wobbly like a balloon on a stick.

15

Waah!

Unhappy children spread misery wherever they go. The older they get the more cruel and destructive they become. They don't understand happiness themselves so they want to destroy it when they see it in anyone else. Some unhappy children spend millions on therapy when they grow up. It doesn't work. When push comes to shove they never quite become adult and they're still unhappy. Others might become artists or writers or poets and pretend their unhappiness gives them a unique understanding of the human condition. It doesn't. It just gives them more efficient ways of broadcasting misery.

This is what the Prince of All Depression told me.

Unhappy children, he told me, are better off dead. 'Suffer poor little Connor to come unto me,' he said. 'I love him. I know what he needs. This should be your work here on earth – releasing my sorrowing little ones and sending them home.'

'Why are you humans so fixated on happiness?' Electra asked. 'The simple scent of a fire hydrant is joy enough for me.'

'That will never be enough for Connor,' I said.

'What won't?' Fergus asked.

'My point exactly,' my Dark Lord told me. 'Connor is human, the most sophisticated and entertaining of all my creations. His joy will be visiting on other little ones the pain he feels himself. Thus my family grows.'

'Then shouldn't he remain here on earth to do thy will?'

'Don't talk to her,' Jade said. 'She's praying.'

'Strictly speaking, yes,' my Master said. 'He should live to do my bidding. But sometimes I need company. I need to chew the fat with a little soul who is well enough versed in the pornography of cruelty to turn me on.'

Connor's head drooped against Electra's shoulder. His drool was toffee

coloured. His scrawny neck was twig-like.

‘Don’t even think about it,’ said Electra.

But I did.

I thought: if a skateboarder rolls out into the road, or a dog chases a ball, and Cherry-Jade slams on the brakes, then Connor will shoot, unrestrained, through the windscreen, his twig will be snapped and his miserable life will be over. I won’t have to beg for more and more money to buy him nappies and chocolate, and my Master’s orders will be obeyed without my having lifted a finger. Then someone will give me a drink – for the shock of it. Even nuns are allowed a little medicinal hootch for their nerves, aren’t they?

‘You’re raving,’ Electra observed – erroneously, in my opinion.

‘I was looking for a little more active participation,’ the Prince of Punishment said. ‘You should watch that tendency towards passive aggression.’

Although the smell was putrid, my real problem with Connor was the racket. A child screaming hurts my ears and twists my brain into a pretzel.

‘You know what?’ Satan said. ‘I nearly wiped out the whole human race once because I couldn’t stand the crying babies. A lot of them were smothered by their parents because they were attracting predators. Raptors ate some. Sabre-toothed tigers ate a lot more. But then I learned to love the distress.’

‘Doesn’t god have anything to say about this?’ I asked.

‘You should think of god as a science geek with a computer game. He’s on Level six billion and eight by now. You are on Level nine. He’s long gone. He doesn’t even know about nuns and if he did he’d laugh. No, it’s me you have to deal with. I’m all there is.’

‘Isn’t that the Ambo?’ Electra asked.

I looked. It was. ‘Stop!’ I said.

‘I can’t,’ Jade-Cherry said. ‘There’s no parking and there’s a taxi right up my tail pipe. I wish they wouldn’t do that. It makes me nervous.’

‘I’d drive,’ Fergus said, ‘but my knee...’

‘We’re nearly there,’ she said. ‘At least, I think we are. Do you recognise this street, Sister?’

I didn’t. It was time for more prayer.

‘Don’t,’ Electra said. ‘All you do is mutter rubbish. You’d be better off sniffing lamp posts.’

‘Look,’ Fergus cried, ‘another nun. Do you know her? We must be close.’

I looked. It was Smister. ‘Don’t stop,’ I said.

Jade stopped. The taxi hit us from behind.

Connor and Electra fell off the back seat. I rocked forward and hit my head on Jade’s headrest. Fergus slid forward and hit his injured knee on the glove box. The airbag blew up in Jade’s face.

Connor shrieked. Fergus roared.

‘Oh crap,’ said Jade through a mouthful of airbag.

Electra scrambled back onto the seat and licked my nose. It was bleeding.

Connor turned his howling face towards me.

‘Nearly,’ said the Prince of Personal Injuries, when he could stop laughing long enough to get the word out.

I stuffed another toffee into Connor’s gaping mouth.

Smister pulled my door open. ‘It had to be you,’ he said by way of greeting.

‘Have a toffee,’ I said.

‘Waaah!’

‘Ow-ow-ow!’

‘Call 999,’ Jade said.

‘The radio’s knackered and my phone’s broken.’ The taxi driver staggered over to open Jade’s door.

‘Nuns don’t own phones,’ Smister said.

‘Next time, get a car with two airbags.’

‘There won’t be a next time. This is all your fault. You’re dumped.’

‘This is all your fault,’ Smister said to me. ‘Cherry’s kicked me out.’

‘This is all your fault,’ ancient Connor yelled at everyone.

‘Actually,’ Satan said, ‘this is *my* doing. Where’s your sense of humour?’

‘Get me out of here,’ Jade and Connor yelled together.

‘You just slammed your bleeding brakes on in the middle of the road,’ the taxi driver said.

‘You were tailgating,’ Fergus said. He limped over to Jade’s side of the car and looked helplessly at the airbag. ‘Aren’t these supposed to deflate automatically?’ Blood was seeping through the bandage on his knee.

‘I didn’t stand a chance,’ said the taxi driver.

‘It’s your fault,’ Jade yelled. ‘I have two nuns as witnesses.’

Smister and I looked at each other.

‘Pray.’ Smister pulled me aside. He spoke with his hands folded and his head bowed. ‘You’ve no idea the bother you’ve landed me in,’ he said. ‘I’m so fed up with this nun shit. But Cherry gave me the old heave-ho. She’s kept my medication, and I can’t get to my clothes. I’m scared what she’ll do. She’s chopped up all Pierre’s frocks. Can you believe it? She knew who he was when she started going with him. He never deceived her. But she’s been trying to turn him into a “proper man” ever since. If she wanted the kind of boyfriend she could take home to Daddy she should’ve picked one.’

‘Doesn’t surprise me,’ I said. ‘I told you she was the Devil’s daughter.’

‘No you didn’t. You were just jealous of her and Electra.’

Hearing her name, Electra came over to greet him. Whatever his other faults I thought Smister was genuinely fond of her.

‘Got any dosh?’ he asked, stroking Electra’s neck.

I showed him my hands. I was holding a ten pound note and a bag of toffees.

‘That won’t take me far.’

‘It’s for Connor. Satan keeps giving him back to me. It’s not fair. It wasn’t me who kidnapped him.’

‘Well, Pierre and me would never have even heard of him if it wasn’t for you. And shut up with the Satan malarkey – it isn’t clever.’

We stared at each other. I was pleased to see him even though his pretty face kept morphing into a capuchin monkey’s.

‘You’re ratted,’ he said. ‘What’re you on? Gimme some.’

‘She cut up all Pierre’s dresses?’ I wanted to hear more bad things about Miss Self-Righteous. It made me feel better about hating her. ‘What about the wigs?’

‘Threw them out into the back garden. It was raining. She’s a cow.’

‘Miss Malice is a moo-cow,’ I hummed happily.

‘She changed all the rules. She came on like she totally accepted who we were. But after a while it was, “Just this once, take me someplace where you wear a smart suit.” Then it was, “But my family think you’re a freak.” She only put up with me because she thought she could change Pierre and then force *him* to chuck me out.’

Fergus and Jade came over. Her feathers were ruffled and she was squawking and pecking everyone in sight. She sat on Fergus’s right wrist with her claws clamped so tightly it looked as though his skin would break and bleed.

‘You’re the other nun,’ Fergus said to Smister.

‘You’re my witnesses,’ Jade said. ‘I’ll need your names and addresses for the insurance form.’

‘I love a nice package in spandex,’ Smister muttered.

I said, ‘There are three of us – itinerant nuns – Poor Clares – since the bailiffs repossessed the convent. Bailiffs have never understood the vow of poverty.’

‘Excuse me?’ Jade cocked her head on one side and shook her wings.

She should’ve been a crow, I thought, but in fact she was a turquoise and yellow macaw. Fortunately her feathers were too ruffled for her to recognise insanity when she saw it. She handed me a Hello Kitty notebook and a pink ballpoint pen. I wrote, ‘Sister Angela Mary and Sister Josephine Mary’ and gave Ms Malice-Moo’s address. I thought Jade and Ms Malice would get along

famously. I was doing them both a favour.

The taxi driver said, 'I need witnesses too. She jammed on her brakes. How was I to know? Her brake lights were out.'

'They are now,' Fergus pointed to the crumpled back of the Honda and the shattered glass on the road.

I wrote 'Breaks brakes' on the dirty envelope the taxi driver gave me. I added Ms Moo's address. He deserved to go to the party too. I folded the envelope carefully and gave it back to him. Nobody thanked me.

I handed the bag of toffees to the macaw. They did belong to her after all and Poor Clares are honest about that sort of thing. I said, 'Give Connor one of these three times an hour. We're off to find reinforcements. Back soon.' I walked away with Sister Smister and Electra.

'Squawk!' screeched the macaw.

'That's right, leave me with a bunch of... you don't even *know*, do you? They could be child abusers,' screamed Connor.

'Oy,' said the taxi driver.

'Not so fast,' said the Devil. 'I haven't finished with you yet.'

'Well, I've finished with you,' I said, although it doesn't matter what I say – it's the Devil's intentions that count. My association with free will ended the minute I fell in love.

'That doesn't mean you forgot the difference between right and wrong,' Electra said, trotting along at my side. 'Even now – you know you shouldn't leave a baby with strangers.'

'I'm a stranger,' I protested. 'But he was left with me.'

'And getting stranger all the time,' Sister Smister said. 'Now give!'

We'd turned a corner and were out of sight of the car crash. I backed into a doorway and he hid me while I fumbled in my robes for the diazepam.

'A fat lot of good that's going to do,' Electra sniffed around my feet. I ignored her while Smister and I popped a couple of caps.

'It's my nerves,' he said. And indeed, for a pretty nun, he looked remarkably frazzled.

'Have you been crying?'

'Oh, well spotted,' Electra said, licking his hand sympathetically.

'I've lost everything,' he said. 'I don't know what to do. I have to get back into the house for my medication. If I don't keep taking the tablets I'll be bearded and flat-chested in no time at all. And if I can't get at my frocks I won't be able to show myself to my sweet endocrinologist. But Cherry took my keys.'

'That's what you get when you can't control yourself,' I said. 'If you'd thought for one minute about your endocrinologist and less about Zach this

might never have happened.'

'And what a bust that turned out to be. He's obsessed with his sister. It's sick. They seem to fancy the same men. He wasn't interested in me at all. It's all your fault. The nun thing was your idea. And now I'm stuck with it.'

'Where are they now – Débris d'Or?'

His sudden cheeky grin lit up his face. 'It was brilliant – Cherry came home for lunch and found Tantie in the kitchen making omelettes. They're occupying her house. They said, like, "property's theft" and they won't leave.'

'So you won't be giving my dog to Ms Malice, then?'

'That was never the idea,' he said without even blushing. 'You know you can trust me – we're mates.'

Without even thinking about it we followed Electra into a churchyard and sat down on a Victorian gravestone dedicated to Sarah Anne, wife of, daughter of, sister to, three men – all with surnames and occupations. Was it common practice, I wondered, for Victorian blokes to use a woman's grave for professional advertising? We used it for a sofa and leaned against each other waiting for serenity to kick in.

I remembered that we really were mates. A year ago he wouldn't have dreamt of dosing me with Antabuse. Although that's not strictly true – he is easily swayed by superior forces, and his need for expensive womanly accoutrements leaves him vulnerable to threats. In short, he's weak and unreliable. But a mate's a mate.

He said, 'Every one pretends to be what they're not sometimes.'

'I don't.'

We both looked at my rumpled black habit and burst out laughing.

He went on, 'I mean, like, when you're in love and you pretend to be more like your lover than you are.' He sighed tragically. 'But Cherry didn't do that. She didn't want to change herself, she wanted to change Pierre. How can she say she loves him if she doesn't want him to be what he is? If she tries to destroy what's important to him?'

Before I loved the Devil I thought I was an honest and decent woman. I didn't change for him. He showed me up for what I actually was, deep down in my heart and soul – a dirty, dirty bad girl. My hunger for love overcame all ethics and honesty.

'But you didn't try to change *him*,' he persisted.

Try to change the Lord of Dark Inadmissible Truths? Maybe I should've tried. Even a pitiful effort counts for something.

'He wasn't the Devil, you silly old mare,' Smister said. 'You'd rather do anything than be alone. That's all it was – a lonely woman and a greedy guy.'

The King of Broken Hearts laughed and said, 'You were only honest

through lack of opportunity.'

'I wasn't stealing for gain, I was stealing for love.'

'And did you find love?' Smister was sneering. He always does when we get to this part of the story. He said, 'You loved but you weren't loved. You were used. Doesn't matter why you did it – it was still stealing.'

I was losing clarity by the bucket load. It wasn't a joined-up conversation.

Smister said, 'You've got to help me get back into the house.' And he said, 'Where am I going to live?'

And I said, 'Pierre has the keys.'

'Maybe. But I don't know where he is. I was going to find him when I saw you.'

'He drove away in the Ambo – and we passed it a couple of minutes ago. It must've broken down and he abandoned it.'

'Are you going to help me or what? If you went to Cherry's front door and knocked, maybe I could creep in through the kitchen. Zach and the others wouldn't give me away.'

'Do it,' said Mr Trouble-maker Supreme. 'You want to get back at Cherry, don't you?'

'Plee-ase?' Smister got up.

Without support I nearly toppled over. Electra left a particularly interesting gravestone and came to lay her head against my knee. 'Are we going to see Cherry?' she asked.

'No,' I said.

'You promised,' Smister protested. 'You can't be so squishy-brained you forgot already.'

Can't I? 'I didn't promise. When did I promise?'

'Just now.' In a nun's habit Smister looked impossibly young and honest.

'Did I?'

'Of course you did,' said Il Fibberino.

'I didn't hear,' said Electra, the truth teller. 'But I'm hungry, thirsty and tired. Cherry has food, water and a soft carpet.'

Stalling for time I said, 'I meant, Pierre has the keys to the *Ambo*. He stole it back from Louis.'

'Who's Louis?' Smister's eyes had the gauzy fey sheen they get when he's bombed.

'The angry Débris d'Or.'

'Right.' He didn't have a clue what I was talking about but he nodded sagely.

I thought, I can't stand this any more. I can't go to Cherry's house and I have to get out of this pious costume. It would be so much easier if I actually

was a nun. If you ignore small deficiencies like the fact that I believe in the Devil but not in god I think I'd make quite a good one. All I need is some penitence and humility. I've got the poverty bit down cold. At least I'd be fed and I'd always know what to do.

'Stop laughing,' I said to Smister.

'I'm not laughing. When did I laugh?'

I could hear laughter. I covered my ears.

Electra, said, 'Hurry. He's leaving us.'

Smister was already at the graveyard gate.

Electra said, 'You can't let him go back on his own. He'll fall among thieves. You know he will.'

I stood up. A gravestone hit me in the ribs. I thought I could just lie there and sleep.

'Wet grass,' Electra pointed out. 'You'll catch your death.'

'What a good idea,' I said, but she was already trotting after Smister.

I got up and followed her even though I knew she was going to the place where I didn't want to be. I could hear sirens braying in the distance. Sirens and disembodied laughter were the soundtrack to the day, and they didn't foretell a peaceful future.

16

Betrayal

I want you to remember that none of this was my fault.

‘Chaos theory would say otherwise,’ said the Master of Muddle. ‘If you hadn’t mentioned Kerrilla Cropper’s child...’

‘If Kerrilla hadn’t asked me...’

‘And a butterfly flapped its wings in Ecuador,’ he said with a self-satisfied smirk in his voice. ‘Butterflies are my favourite tool. Haven’t you figured it out yet? I just love butterflies and good intentions.’

‘Belt the fuck up,’ said Smister. ‘You’re making a show of us.’

‘I shouldn’t be here,’ I said. ‘And especially Electra shouldn’t be here.’

‘You’re helping me out. You owe me after everything I’ve done for you.’ He didn’t pause to explain but took a deep breath and marched up to Cherry’s front door. There was a knocker and a bell. He used both. I was checking in all directions for police cars so I didn’t have time to object.

Cherry pulled the door open so quickly she might have been waiting for us.

‘Go away,’ she yelled.

‘But look,’ Smister cried, ‘I’ve brought your dog back.’

‘So you did,’ she said coolly. She snapped her fingers. Obediently, Electra stepped towards her with a polite wave of the tail. Smister gave her a shove from behind. Cherry caught her and pulled her inside. Quick as a rat up a drainpipe, Smister followed. Cherry slammed the door in my face. Two seconds of absolute treachery.

‘You treacherous skanky scabby old cow,’ I screamed at the door. I didn’t know who I was screaming at – Cherry, Smister or even Electra. Cherry was the enemy. They both knew that, and yet they were both cuddling up to her.

‘Thieves,’ I screamed, ‘whores. Diseased insects crawling on the face of humanity – call yourselves human beings? Turds, arse-wipes...’

‘Atta girl!’ said my one true friend, the Fiend.

‘She’s already called the police,’ a neighbour said, poking his head out of an upstairs window. ‘And if they ain’t here in two minutes flat, I’ll call ’em myself.’ He waved a mobile phone at me. ‘Don’t think I haven’t complained already. The street’s been on the skids ever since she moved that darkie feller in. I’m not supposed to say that but it’s true. And now it’s foreigners and religious fundamentalists. Don’t tell me it ain’t – I can hear the singing. And your language! That’s no way for a nun to talk. You should be ashamed.’

‘I’m not a fucking nun!’ I tore off the hated wimple and the cold damp wind shrivelled my scalp. ‘I’d like to skin the mean bastard who thinks it’s a good idea to dress women in long black sacks. You can’t move and you can’t run or breathe and everyone calls you Sister instead of your real name.’ Off came the black batwings. ‘You have no freaking identity. You might as well be in prison with a sodding number instead of a name. I’m not a number *or* your bleeding sister. And *I want my dog back!*’

A rumpled pile of empty black fabric lay at my feet. Now I was just wearing a red shell suit. And I was cold. Very cold. ‘And keep your fat nose out of my business,’ I went on, although I was running out of gas and needed a huge swig of red wine and a good idea.

‘I’m not fat, I’m disabled,’ he yelled back at me. ‘You people – if you ain’t looking at me like I’m some kind of nut job, you’re overlooking me like I don’t even exist, or you say straight to my face I’m sponging off of the state. At least you can get out and about. I can’t. I’m stuck here with four walls for company and I can’t even go downstairs without the Home Help, and she’s two hours, forty minutes late, the lazy bugger.’

‘At least you’ve got four walls.’

‘At least you’ve got two working legs.’

‘At least you’re warm.’

‘At least you can make a cup of tea when you want one.’

‘I would if I had a poxy kitchen,’ I yelled. Then in the millisecond of opportunity I said, ‘I could make you a cuppa, if you want. Or help you downstairs.’

‘Think I’d let someone like you in my house? You swear like a squaddie and you ain’t even brushed your hair for a week.’

‘Take it or leave it.’

‘Beggars can’t be choosers.’ The exchange of clichés seemed to reassure him. After a moment’s hesitation he said, ‘I got a panic button. One wrong move from you and I use it.’ He threw down a bunch of keys.

His house was exactly like Ms Spiteful’s. But where hers was pink and girly, his was brown and neglected.

It wasn't that he didn't have legs – just that they were inadequate to carry his bulk very far. There was a walking frame by the bed, a wheelchair by the door, numerous handrails and a stair lift.

'I hurt me back, lost me job and me wife left me,' he said, when he caught me staring at the vast expanse of uncontrollable flesh in which he was trapped.

'You don't have to explain depression to me,' I said.

'I ain't depressed, I'm effing pissed off. The Home Help's late. Meals on Wheels missed me out. Me daughter hasn't come with a pie. The DVD's stuck in the whatsit and I can't bend down to find the remote I dropped last night.'

I picked up the remote and handed it to him. He didn't say thank you. He turned the telly on to horse racing, called his bookie and made a bet. Without taking his eyes off the screen he said, 'There's four cans of chicken noodle soup downstairs. Heat 'em up and bring the whole pan up with a spoon. I ain't dainty.'

'No shit,' I said, and made for the stairs.

The kitchen was a revelation. It looked like a warehouse. Bulk-bought chicken noodle soup was stacked to the ceiling, as was tinned rice pudding and a mountain of Fosters lager. I took a can straight away – well, wouldn't you? I mean a skivvy needs wages, doesn't she?

I opened the kitchen door and went out into the scraggy back garden. An eight-foot fence separated it from Cherry's next door. I could flatten part of it, I thought, and steal Electra back next time she was let out for a pee. I leaned against the fence but it didn't sag even half an inch.

While the soup was heating up I drank my lager and searched the kitchen for something better. The guy was a fan of soft food and weak beer. Everything he needed could be opened with a ring pull. There seemed to be nothing in the house that might force him to chew or unscrew. I stole another can of Fosters.

'Go away,' he said when I gave him the saucepan full of soup. 'I can't stand people watching me eat. I know what you're thinking, and it ain't like you got no faults.'

'Indeed it ain't,' I said, and went through to the small room at the back of the house. The window overlooked his garden. I opened it and leaned out.

Ms Malice's was a corner house so she had space around her and a bit of driveway where the Ambo used to be parked. Her garden was deeper and better kept than her neighbour's. There was a shed and about ten leafless rose bushes. I should ring Big Boy's bookie, I thought, and bet on the flowers being pink.

I couldn't see or hear what was going on in the house so I sat down on the single bed and leaned back against the wall letting my head droop and my eyes close.

‘What do you want to sleep for?’ said insomniac Satan. ‘Shouldn’t you be next door, kicking up chaos? Where’s your pride? Where’s your dog?’

‘Leave me be,’ I said. ‘If I don’t sleep I’ll go bozey-quat.’

‘Excuse me?’ he said, ‘but I don’t know that word. Is it a medical condition?’

The guy was leaning on his walker, purple in the face from effort. He said, ‘You can make my bed while I’m in the bathroom.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘If you want to spy on next door you got to make yourself useful.’

‘Who said...?’

‘I wasn’t born yesterday.’ He really was a dab hand with clichés.

‘What did your last servant die of?’ I asked, not to be outdone.

‘And don’t pinch any more of my beer.’ He turned his back and began inching his way towards the bathroom. ‘I may be disabled but there’s nothing wrong with my nose.’

I straightened his vast steel-reinforced bed and turned his pillows. The 3.10 at Chepstow Races was about to start. I sat down on his sofa. It was 3.10 in the afternoon. Time had gone berserk. I no longer knew when it was I’d walked out of prison. And where was I now – in yesterday, today or tomorrow?

I dreamed I was on a treadmill somewhere out in the country – the moors, I think. I could’ve been on a ramble, free to roam anywhere, but instead I was walking at exactly four miles per hour on the treadmill. Electra said, ‘I want to get off.’ But there was no stop button.

The guy said, ‘That’s my chair.’ And I woke up.

He said, ‘If you want to sleep there’s a sofa downstairs. Wash up the saucepan while you’re at it.’

I got up and he sat down.

I said, ‘I’ve been concussed twice today. I was hit by a bus and...’

‘What’s happening outside?’ he interrupted. ‘I can hear screaming.’

I got to the window just in time to see Fergus and Connor climb out of a black cab. Fergus was limping and his bandage was still soaked red. He held roaring Connor by the hand and was dragging him to Chilly Cherry’s front door. His girlfriend was not there.

‘What’s happening?’ asked Big Boy.

I said, ‘I’m in your house, I’ve cooked your lunch and I’ve made your bed. What’s your name?’

‘Billy,’ he said. ‘What’s happening?’

Cherry’s house was at an angle to Billy’s so I could see her front door from his bedroom window.

I told him: ‘A guy in cycling spandex and a bloody bandage is taking a

little boy to Miss Malice's front door. He's ringing the bell...' I did not mention that Fergus had noticed the discarded nun's habit on the path and was looking bewildered.

'The little boy's beside himself,' I added unnecessarily – he could probably be heard in Paris.

'What did you call her next door?' Billy asked. He seemed as avid for news as for food.

'Is she a friend of yours?'

'Yeah, right,' he said. 'She calls me Belly and I call her Witch-Bitch.'

'Not very fair to wise women or lady dogs,' I observed.

'You a feminist or something? What's happening now?'

'Fergus is hammering on the door. He looks desperate. Connor's biting his hand. Ooh, he's drawn blood. That's one feral toddler.'

'Who's Fergus? Who's Connor?'

'Oh look,' I cried. 'Sylvie just opened the door. They're talking.'

'Open the window. You can't hear with the window shut.'

So that was what he did for fun when the racing was finished. I opened the window. 'They're talking French,' I told him, disappointed. I had to admit that it was a lot more fun to be safe upstairs watching than to be in Fergus's position in the cold, being bitten.

'An educated cyclist,' I said. Fergus was engaging in a proper to-and-fro French conversation. 'Uh-oh!'

'What, *what*?'

'He's falling for her.' I was far too tired to be a sensitive reader of body language, but even I could see Fergus's attitude change from belligerent to melting. You can't hide much in a spandex cycle suit so Sylvie probably noticed too.

'Who's Sylvie?'

'An environmental activist, maybe, or maybe a singer – I'm not sure. But she's beautiful – long auburn hair, huge amber-coloured eyes. Helpless in a fawn-like way. Surprisingly I don't hate her.'

'Well I do,' Billy said with complete certainty. 'Cos she'd look down her beautiful nose at me. Pretty women make me sick. What's happening now?'

'Fergus is trying to push Connor inside. Oh, hello – there's Ms Icy Pants. I was wondering how long it'd take her to get involved.'

'What's she doing?'

'She's trying to push Sylvie out. That's never going to work – not with Tantie and Zach still inside.'

'I've got to see this.' Billy started the long miserable task of getting to his feet.

‘She’s coming unglued,’ I said with unkind satisfaction. ‘Though, to be fair, it is her house and it’s been invaded. Plus she dumped her boyfriend. She isn’t having a perfect day.’

‘She’s got rid of the darkie?’ The floorboards groaned as he made his way over to the window. ‘She used to have standards, but she’d been alone since her hubby went barmy. You didn’t know? She had him sectioned and he’s rotting in a secure unit somewhere. She never goes to see him.’ He joined me, squeezing me into the corner as he leaned against the sill. Now he had a better view than I did.

‘Yeah,’ he said, stretching his neck as far as it would go. ‘When I moved here he was living with his first wife and their little boy. Then the Witch-Bitch... I dunno... one day there was this little family next door, and then suddenly the wife and kid disappear. Enter Cherry Price. And Steve was never the same from that day on. I used to see him in the garden at weekends, smoking, maybe weeding a bit. Then she stopped him smoking, and I’d see him just sitting there outside, chewing gum. Sometimes he’d wave to me. So she outlawed chewing gum. Then he sat and cried. Oh bugger, they’ve all gone indoors.’

He levered himself onto the bed because it was closer to the window than the sofa. ‘It was his house. For all I know it still is. But he can’t live in it no more. You feminists think you’re all victims of men, but look at poor old Steve. And me for that matter.’

I could’ve told him a thing or two about the man who stole *my* house, *my* life, *my* sanity and *my* freedom, but I was just too tired. I didn’t want to take him on about sexism either – I was too poor and too sick to be interested. As for racism – I was just too needy to take a righteous stand on any subject at all. What was I doing making lunch for a man like that, I wondered as I nodded off on his huge, comfortable sofa.

He might’ve given me half an hour’s kip – I don’t know, I wasn’t counting. Then, ‘Oy,’ he said, ‘oy, you, what’s yer name, where’s the cup of tea you promised me? You ain’t done the washing up yet.’

‘Want to wait for the Home Help?’ I can be nasty when I’ve just woken up.

He pointed to the electronic contraption that hung round his neck. ‘I’ll press the button and get you evicted,’ he said.

I didn’t believe him. He was just too damn lonely even to get rid of a waste of space like me.

‘You could stay here,’ Satan Satanis whispered. ‘You could steal his disability pension. You could get paid for opening cans of slop for him. You could steal Electra back.’

‘Taking back what’s mine isn’t stealing.’

‘What isn’t stealing?’

‘Electra is my dog. Your frozen-faced neighbour stole her from me.’

‘The old greyhound?’ He sounded interested. ‘See, that surprised me. I never thought Witch-Bitch would ever want an animal messing up her soft furnishings. The pretty one brought her one day. I don’t know why Witch-Bitch puts up with having girls in her house. She never had no women friends before. Only men.’

‘Now *there’s* a surprise,’ I murmured.

‘I get the darkie,’ Billy went on. ‘He does her motor for her. Keeps it in really good nick, saves her a bomb. She can use him. But what’s the blonde good for?’

‘Brilliant beautician,’ I said. ‘She wouldn’t be any threat – she has a medical condition.’

‘Like what?’

‘Er, like, er, something wrong with her nether regions.’ Like all the boy bits Smister was trying to get rid of.

That perked Billy right up. He seemed suddenly to be in a really good mood. It turned out his horse, a big ugly brute called Bath Bambino, had won him over a hundred quid in the 3.10. I offered to pick up his winnings for him. He laughed. So I went downstairs to make him a cup of tea and heat four cans of rice pudding. His tea mug held more than a pint and had the legend ‘I Am A Big Mug’ stencilled on the side.

I took another pill while I was down there and opened the kitchen door into the garden. I could hear shouting from next door but there were too many voices and not enough clarity. How many people were in there? Seven? My lips stretched into an unkind smile.

The fence, unfortunately, was very solidly built. Maybe I could persuade Billy to lean against it. I was suddenly afraid I was becoming as spiteful as Bitter Cherry.

I served the rice pudding in a large plastic mixing bowl as he requested, with four spoons of raspberry jam on top. I didn’t steal another can of lager but found a dusty old bottle of sweet sherry at the back of a cupboard in the living room. What a dilemma – I love alcohol but I hate sweet sherry. My life’s a mess; even a decision about a drink is beyond me. I lay down on his sofa and closed my eyes.

17

Chaos In Suburbia

Billy graciously allowed me one can of his chicken noodle soup and one can of creamed rice for my supper, but only after I'd fed him. He was weird – as well as not wanting me to see him eat he couldn't bear to watch me eat either. 'It's *my* food,' he said, even though he'd given his permission. 'Don't let me see you taking any.'

But he was pleased with himself. One win and two places put him well ahead from his afternoon at the races. The other thing I learned about him was that he played online poker and was a small winner at that too. The Social Services knew nothing about either occupation. 'And don't you tell them nothing neither,' he said. 'They're just looking for a way to cut me benefits. I know what they're thinking, see.'

What did I care about his winnings? Abso-bleeding-lutely nothing. I woke up from my deep nap with a skull-crushing headache and a hole in my heart where Electra should be. Maybe she'd been out in the garden while I was asleep. Maybe I'd missed my only opportunity to steal her back. Worst of all I kept thinking that she wouldn't want to come back. Maybe I *had* saved her life but that wouldn't save *me*. It was in the past. Now she was with a younger woman with a steady income, a house and a comfy carpet. So why would she want a damaged old broad with a craving for red wine? I tried to cheer myself up by washing down a diazepam with the hated sweet sherry. Sweet sherry really is an old tart's drink. It clings to the roof of your mouth and the back of your throat like treacle.

There was no money and no red wine downstairs. I looked everywhere. There were no photos of the missing wife either but there was a picture of a younger fitter Billy posing astride a big Honda motorbike. Clearly he'd never been a beauty but he looked strong and as if he had once enjoyed his life.

Overcome by sadness I borrowed his huge black duffle coat which was hanging on a hook in the hall. It smelled of dust and I wondered how long it'd been since he'd worn it. I put his door on the latch and went out into the rain.

It was dark. There were chinks of light winking at me from behind Ms Mean's pink velour curtains. I couldn't see in, but I could hear Connor screaming.

'You're not wanted,' the Devil said. 'She'll put up with French environmental activists and screaming babies before she'll let you set foot in her house again.'

'I'm not talking to you,' I said. 'I don't want to go in. I want Electra to come out.'

'You know what Electra's doing? She's lying asleep at Cherry's feet. Her belly's full and she's warm and comfortable. Yet you want her to come out and freeze her buns off with you.' He sniggered unkindly. 'That's the kind of love I approve of,' he said.

'Shut up,' I said. 'I'm lurking.'

'Not very good at it, are you? What have you learned by lurking? Dipsy-doodle. Why don't you just toddle away to the off-licence? You still have the ten pound note that woman gave you in the hospital car park.'

Astoundingly, he was right – there was a ten pound note in the pocket of my red trackie bottoms. Smister hadn't stolen it. I hadn't lost it.

I didn't obey orders though. I went to the nearest all-night convenience store and found two cans of dogfood and two thick bars of milk chocolate. Only then did I add a two litre bottle of red wine to my basket. I had a plan.

With only a small nip of the red nectar to encourage me I went back to Billy's house.

I can't describe how good that first jolt of wine tasted as it filled my mouth with its ancient promise of comfort and joy. It slid over my tongue and down my throat like butter on hot toast and settled in my stomach, a loving hand. Now I could talk to Billy. Now I could deal with an uncaring universe.

Billy said, 'Where've you been? I was calling and calling. You can't just bugger off when you feel like it.'

I produced one of the chocolate bars and said, 'I went to buy you this, y'know, as thanks for letting me stay for a little while.'

'What's the matter?' he said, snatching it out of my hand. 'You want me to die of Type 2 Diabetes?' He hardly had time to get the words out before a quarter of the bar was in his mouth.

'What's happening next door?' I asked.

'There's a kid crying and it's doing my head in. Why's she got a kid in there? She can't stand kids. I don't get it. It's since the darkie came to stay. He

brought the blonde piece. She's tasty. But why would Cherry even let her through the door? She'd never have let her husband even talk to another woman. Like she wouldn't let him have a dog, so I don't get the greyhound either. As for kids – know what? Steve's little son? He was only two years-old when Witch-Bitch forced Steve into kicking him and his mum out. To begin with the kid came every weekend. Then, later, Steve started waiting for him on the street – she wouldn't let his son in the house, see, so he'd have to take him out somewhere. By the end of the year that little boy disappeared. She plays a long game, that cow, but she always gets her own way no matter how many steps it takes.'

'Well she isn't taking my dog,' I said.

'I thought she already had.'

'Why doesn't anyone stand up to her?'

'There's women like that,' Billy said sadly. 'They make it more trouble than it's worth.'

'Men can be like that too.'

'Bring us another beer,' he said without listening.

I brought him another can and while I was in the kitchen I poured myself a glass of wine.

I poured myself a glass of wine! Do you know what that means? No, of course you don't. You haven't been glugging down wine from the neck of a plastic bottle for more years than you can remember. You probably have glasses in a kitchen cupboard, in a kitchen, in a flat or a house. You put the glass on the kitchen counter, fill it with wine and then take it through to the living room. Or you open a bottle at table and pour for your lover or friends. Sometimes a waiter or a barman does it for you. If you have a house you can have glasses and friends to pour for. If you haven't – well, all you've got is a bottle with a screw cap. Sometimes you have to share. So you pass it back and forth and hope none of your temporary drinking buddies is dying of a communicable disease. Sick Hazel caught her permanent bronchial illness by sharing cider bottles with someone who died last year. Now she drinks cider from a can. But it's too late.

Billy drank his beer straight from the can too. But that was by choice – he has glasses in his cupboard and two pint mugs gathering dust on the kitchen window sill.

I took my glass upstairs and stood by the window sipping like a civilised person. I was warm. My hands were clean. If Billy wanted to attack me it'd be like being chased by a zombie. I'd be able to escape by the front door and run twice round the block before he managed to climb out of his sofa.

I was safe. I almost said it out loud just to hear the words.

Watching the street, letting the wine stroke away the perpetual cycle of anxieties which cramped and spasmed in my mind like abused muscles, I realised I'd met someone whose self-esteem was even more damaged than my own. It was an unfamiliar situation – but one I thought I could exploit. All I had to do was make myself indispensable.

If Frozen Cherry was a cow who could play a long game, so would I be.

Don't you sit there and judge me. You haven't just come out of prison, lost your mobile home and had your dog stolen. When you've lived for years on the street and slept in doorways never knowing who might rob you, rape you or set light to your feet for fun, then you can judge me. But not before.

'Another beer, Billy?' I asked with a helpful smile.



Chaos kicked off at nine forty-five precisely.

Two cops, a tall one and a short one, turned up and knocked on the door of Cherry's igloo. They brought with them a middle-aged woman in leggings and a low-cut top. Her bosoms seemed unaware of the freezing wind, but that might've been because she was less than stone cold sober.

'She's a bit of all right,' Billy said, squeezing in beside me at the window.

I wondered if there was something wrong with his eyesight.

Smister opened the door. He would've slammed it shut immediately except for a size thirteen constabulary boot. He had forsaken the trappings of poverty and chastity for a fuchsia coloured angora sweater and a royal purple miniskirt.

'I wouldn't kick her out of bed neither,' Billy said, forgetting what I'd told him about the misshapen nether regions.

The cops seemed to want a quiet conversation but the woman started yelling.

'Oy, you, blondie,' she went, at the top of her voice. 'Yeah, you – where's them nuns I been hearing about? Them nuns stole my grandson – *perverts!*'

Smister looked as if he was going to faint.

'Bloodyell,' I said, 'that's Kerri Cropper's mum.'

'Who's Kerri Cropper?'

'Connor's mum.'

'Who's Connor?'

I reminded him as quickly as I could but he wasn't listening. He didn't want to miss a second of what was happening outside Cherry's house. And nor did I. Chaos is fun when you aren't in the middle of it.

'I knew you'd come round to my way of thinking,' said the Lord

O'Disorder.

'Oh belt up,' I said. I just wanted to be normal for once.

'What?'

'What?'

'Did you just tell me to belt up?'

'It's Mrs Cropper,' I said quickly. 'Anyone would think she was Connor's protector. But she's the opposite. And someone should tell the cops not to let her anywhere near him.'

'Shouldn't you go down there? Tell them yourself?'

'Billy,' I said, 'only suggest that if you *don't* want another can of beer brought up to you tonight. I'm the sort of woman who gets blamed for absolutely everything.'

'Yeah,' he said, 'why was you dressed up like a nun? I keep meaning to ask.'

Smister was speaking too quietly to be heard. But Kerri's mum shouted, 'If my boy's got so much as a mark on him I'll know who to blame.'

'Nice one,' said the Devil with admiration. 'Go girl! Way to offload guilt.'

I said, 'The kid's covered with burns and bruises and it's all down to her and her boyfriend.'

'I don't get why that guy with the bloody knee brought him here,' Billy said with some justification.

'Who's that screaming?' one of the cops asked.

Cherry chose that moment to appear. She was dragging Connor by his dungaree straps. She said, 'Just take him away. I don't know why anyone brought him here in the first place.'

The cops looked at Connor. Connor looked at his grandma and went berserk. Cherry let go of Connor's straps, stepped back inside her house and slammed the door, leaving him and Smister outside.

'Looks like a job for the social workers,' said Billy.

The taller cop hammered on the door while Smister leaned on the bell. The shorter cop crouched to extend a comforting hand to Connor. Connor stopped shrieking long enough to bite him. Mrs Cropper's bosoms expressed innocent outrage but showed no grandmotherly feeling whatsoever. Billy was enthralled. I was afraid, if he leaned much further over the sill, he'd fall or the wall would collapse.

When Cherry opened the door again she had her phone stuck firmly to her face. She said, 'Shut that kid up – I can't hear myself think. I'm talking to my solicitor.'

The tall cop said something I didn't catch, but Cherry replied loudly over the din. 'I called you myself hours ago. Why didn't you respond? Why've you

brought this slut? If she's related to the kid she ought to keep him under control.'

Then she shouted into her phone, 'Mr Vernon, you'd better come immediately, I can't contain the situation.'

Billy started wobbling like a soft-boiled egg. I looked at him with alarm but he was only laughing.

Mrs Cropper said, 'Who're you calling a slut, you stuck-up old mare?'

'Fucking priceless,' said Billy.

'Is this child Connor Cropper, your missing grandson?' the small cop shouted.

'Who're you calling "old"? ' Cherry sneered. 'I'm a damn site younger than you, you dolled up old slapper.'

The tall cop grabbed Mrs Cropper's arm and tried to haul her away to the car.

Connor bit the small cop's knee. The cop jumped so violently he sent Connor flying into Smister. Smister avoided the teeth and escaped indoors.

'Are you *hearing* this?' Cherry said into her phone. 'I've rung the police five times in the last four hours. My home's been invaded by foreign terrorists and a filthy savage child. Finally the police have come, but they've brought an abusive old tart with them. I want you here *at once*. I want to complain to higher authorities. I want the officers to do their job and make my home safe for me to live in.'

'That fucker kicked my Connor,' Mrs Cropper screamed. 'You saw him. That's fucking police brutality, that is. I'll have your balls in a mangle for this. Look at the poor baby – covered in bruises. You all saw what happened. I want compensation.'

'We need backup,' the small cop shouted into his radio, 'and we need it *now*.'

By this time four or five neighbours had gathered. They had their mobile phones pointing at the action and one of them was recording on her camcorder as if what was being acted out in front of them was performance art.

The scene was playing like a farce, but it was a tragedy.

'It's the way I write,' crowed the Poet of Cruelty. 'I keep 'em laughing, you see, so they won't notice the little boy dying of cold and neglect. And when they do, they'll feel so sick with themselves they'll try not to think about it. So they'll turn their backs on what they know. Then next time they'll be just a tiny bit more brutalised. Before you know it they'll be tolerating all sorts of perversion and even wanting to join in. I seduce by increments.'

'What can I do about it?'

'Not a damn thing,' Billy said. 'Don't interfere. I'm enjoying meself for the

first time in I don't know how long.'

'It's so totally screwed up,' I said. 'There's no voice of reason down there.'

Frozen-faced Cherry said, 'Now you're here, why don't you do your jobs and get rid of the terrorists illegally occupying my home? Why don't you take this impossible child into care? I'm the innocent victim here. I pay my council tax and I want action.'

The tall cop was too busy wrestling Mrs Cropper to the car to reply, but the little one said, 'One thing at a time, ma'am. The child comes first.'

'Then give him back to his grandmother. A crime's been committed here and it's still being committed. It's called "home invasion" – or have you never heard of it?'

'You're thinking of trespass,' the small cop said. 'That's not a crime so it isn't our business. Your solicitor will advise you. Meanwhile, please answer some questions, like, how long have you been harbouring a kidnapped child?'

'Excuse me? When did home invasion stop being a crime?'

'It didn't start. It might be a crime in America but it's a tort in the UK. Now about this child... '

'You heard,' Mrs Cropper screamed, 'that pig called me a tart.'

'Tort,' the little cop yelled, '*tort*, you stupid tar... a matter for the civil courts not the police.'

'You gotta feel sorry for the poor little guy,' Billy said without a trace of sorrow. I knew he meant the cop and not Connor.

No one wanted to deal with Connor, who, meanwhile, was trying to go back inside the house. But Cherry Ice wouldn't let him. She didn't touch him; she just blocked every move he made.

I was almost holding my breath, waiting for Electra to appear. She wasn't human. That's why Connor could trust her.

'Why didn't you tell me about home invasion and trespass?' Cherry snapped into her phone. 'Now I look like a fool. What? Say again? Okay, thank you.' She folded up the phone and turned again to the small cop. 'How about assault?' she said. 'I've been assaulted in my own home by three French terrorists. Okay? Now what are you going to do?'

I can't begin to tell you how dejected the short cop looked. He'd picked the wrong call-out, on the wrong night, on the wrong job. Circus lion tamer, he seemed to be thinking, would've been a wiser career choice.

He said, 'The kid still has to come first.'

'Then get rid of the kid,' she yelled. 'Do *something*. Don't just stand there asking stupid questions while my life falls to bits.'

'I could start by arresting you for obstructing... '

'I call you out with a legitimate grievance – assault in my own home – and

you threaten *me*. Go ahead. I'd love to see how that looks on YouTube tomorrow morning.'

The cop turned and saw the neighbours pointing their phones at him. His shoulders slumped.

The tall cop, who'd had no success at folding Mrs Cropper into his car, said, 'Put those phones away or I'll impound them.'

'Ooh, teacher's going to confiscate our phones,' said a neighbour who'd come out in Flopsy Bunny slippers.

It was people power. I was thrilled.

'Hand me my phone,' Billy said. 'I want to get in on this.'

'Who're you going to send the pictures to?' I couldn't squeeze past him so I had to crawl under the bed.

'My girlfriends,' he said.

There is *always* more to people than meets the eye. I passed him his phone, but now he was taking all the space by the window so I went downstairs and out through the kitchen door to the back garden.

18

Pierre Joins The Legion Of Homeless

The first law of opportunism states that when a big kerfuffle is kicking off at the front door, there's a chance that the back door might be left unguarded.

It was dark. The fence between Billy's and the Iron Troll's back gardens was eight feet high and solid. I went back inside to look for a stepladder.

Every house has a stepladder, right? Billy's didn't. I was suddenly angry with him. Why didn't he keep the tools I needed to break into next door's garden? Maybe he had a stepladder once but sat on it and broke it. Then I remembered that I was only in his house at all because he was disabled. I shouldn't be angry; I should be grateful. Also, although he clearly had a corrupted relationship with food, he had fed me. So I should stop making fattist remarks and, again, be grateful.

'Smash the fence with a hammer,' suggested my dark destructive lord. 'Vent that anger on an inanimate object.'

'Who's angry?' I replied, and poured another glass of wine. 'I don't want to talk to you. I want to talk to Electra. You aren't my friend and you give crap advice.'

'I'm everyone's friend. I'm always here when you need me. Always.'

This sounded more like a threat than a comfort, so once again I borrowed Billy's duffle coat without asking and crept away into the night.

The plan was to go next door via the long route, round the block. I couldn't just walk in front of Cherry's house while Cherry was there, could I? Even swamped by the ginormous coat I might still be recognisable. I wanted to keep my presence a secret. If she didn't know I was next door plotting a rescue, she wouldn't guard Electra so closely.

If I turn left, then left, and left again, I reasoned, I would walk round the block and wind up at Cherry's back door.

‘Because that worked so well at the hospital,’ sneered Lord Hindsight.

I really don’t want to admit he was right, but twenty minutes later, instead of finding Ms Dead-eye’s kitchen door, I found the Ambo. It was a sorry sight under the dull yellow light of a street lamp with Débris d’Or’s graffiti all over it.

On the off-chance that Pierre had left it unlocked I tried the back door... and found Pierre sitting on the bunk, hunched over the primus stove, heating up a tin of sausage and beans.

‘Why don’t you knock?’ he said, giving me a shocked stare. ‘Heart attack here.’

‘What on earth are you doing?’ I was as surprised as he was.

‘Cherry kicked me out.’ Torchlight gave his bowling-ball head a soft glow.

‘I know. Smister told me.’

‘Li’l Missy was there?’ He stared at me, eyes dark with emotion. ‘But Cherry kicked her out too.’

‘The treacherous little turd tricked me and gave Electra to Cherry. I’ve got to get her back.’

‘So she took Li’l Missy back in? Know what? I’ve had it – I wish I’d never met either of them.’ He poured the simmering beans into a plastic bowl. ‘Want some?’

I shook my head.

‘Nothing’s ever enough for them,’ he rumbled on.

‘If she wanted a dog why couldn’t she get one of her own?’ I asked

‘She didn’t want a dog,’ he said, blowing on a steaming spoonful. ‘Li’l Missy and Electra came as a package. But she really hated the idea of you. She didn’t want us wasting time on anyone but her. It was okay while I had my own place. But the minute I moved in with her it was like I was her property. It was like she’d won something. I was some kinda trophy and I had to conform to her ideas about what a boyfriend was.’

‘She’s a troll,’ I added just to be supportive, ‘an evil troll.’

‘What I don’t get is Missy. Her and me been homies for years.’

‘He’s an evil troll too.’

‘Calling her names don’t help none.’

‘Well he’s a little mushroom,’ I said. ‘He picks up the strongest flavour in the stew.’

‘She’s weak all right,’ Pierre said. ‘And, funny thing, I’d never’ve said Cherry was strong neither. But if she ain’t, how come she got her way about every fucking thing? How come I bought a suit and tie – which *she* picked out – to meet her folks? How come she cut up my whole wardrobe and I didn’t deck her?’

‘It’s the tyranny of the weak,’ I suggested. ‘They whine and wheedle and demand your pity and protection while in fact they’re manipulating you. And you don’t get it till too late.’

‘Way too complicated for me,’ he said, swallowing the spoonful of sausage and beans. ‘Unless you mean passive-aggressive.’

‘She’s a manipulator. She got rid of her husband’s kid. She got the husband sectioned, and now she’s got his house.’

‘What kid?’ He stared at me, his spoon halfway to his mouth. ‘She told me her husband went crazy and abused her.’

‘Never mentioned the kid then?’

He picked up the torch and turned it on me. He took in the size of my coat and grinned. ‘You talked to the big neighbour, right? And knocked off his coat while you were there.’ He leaned forward, sniffing. ‘You’re on the sauce again. Yeah?’

‘And whose idea was it to dose me with Antabuse?’

He didn’t reply, so I said, ‘We’ve all got to do whatever makes us feel right with ourselves.’

He nodded morosely and kept spooning sausage and beans into his mouth. He seemed to have mislaid his bezaz. Hooking up with the wrong troll can do that to a bloke. I hoped one day before I died I’d be able to see him perform ‘Can’t Hurry Love’ for real in full costume.

‘I should go round there,’ he said, scraping the bottom of the bowl. ‘Have it out with her.’

‘That’d be chucking paraffin on a fire at the moment.’ I told him about Connor, Mrs Cropper and the cops.

He looked banjaxxed. ‘That little chicken just keeps on coming home to roost,’ he said.

‘Or roast,’ I said. ‘No one wants him. No one can cope with him.’

‘They were killing him,’ he said. ‘Y’know, at that fucking awful place in Shoreditch. I couldn’t just take a picture and walk.’

‘Yeah, but where’s the follow-up? You left him by himself in this ambulance. How was I to know that when I drove off? What were you going to do – ask Ms Malice to adopt him?’

‘I didn’t know she was going to wig out like she did. I didn’t know you were going to take the dog. She so doesn’t like losing. She laid it all on me – about the nun shit, about Connor, about the dog, about you being the last straw. All your crap. All *my* crap. Like, she called me a pervert and a deviant. If she thought that, how come she wanted me to sleep in her goddamn pink bed and pay her fucking pink mortgage for her? If she liked me, how come she wanted to change me?’

‘What did you ever see in her?’

‘How the fuck should I know? She came on to me at a hen party at my club. She’d been drinking. She thought I was a bouncer – didn’t know I was a performer. I’d been drinking too, and I guess I thought she was pretty enough for the one time. It just grew from there – step by step. I don’t even *like* blonde women.’

‘How do you like blonde women who steal dogs and throw abused kids out into the cold?’ I asked.

‘Don’t make me think about it,’ he said with his head down, not meeting my eyes. He shivered suddenly and tried to warm his hands on the meagre primus flame.

‘Are you going to stay here tonight?’

He stared around the Ambo, at the narrow bunk beds, the tiny basin, the primus stove. Smister, Electra and I had lived in it once. But Pierre was bigger than all three of us put together. He looked miserable.

‘Is this what it’s like?’ he asked. ‘Suddenly you got nowhere to call your own? Nowhere to put your stuff. Nowhere to be private?’

‘Pretty much – although usually it isn’t so sudden. Step by tiny step – like hooking up with the wrong kind of troll – and before you know it you’ve got nothing and nowhere. And you aren’t really sure which the crucial step was. At least you have a good job and money. You could go to a hotel for a couple of nights.’

‘Know what?’ he said, flashing me a transforming smile. ‘I like you better on the sauce.’

‘So do I,’ I said. True – I *did* feel more relaxed with him now that I’d had a couple of glassfuls, and he wasn’t pretending to be a responsible adult who knew what was best for me. As a drag artiste, down on his luck, he was a lot more human. And now he wasn’t smooching Little Miss Perfect and calling her ‘Honeee’ I could stand his company without wanting to puke.

‘Come back to Billy’s with me,’ I offered. ‘There’s a sofa bigger than these two bunks put together. And a downstairs bog and wet room. If you’re quiet he’ll never know you’re there.’

‘He’s a racist. He called me a nig-nog to my face. Can you beat that?’



‘Where the fuck was you?’ Billy yelled. ‘I been calling and calling.’

‘Do you want another beer or what?’

‘Yeah, I want a beer. It’s what I drink in case you hadn’t noticed.’

‘Well in case *you* didn’t notice, I drink wine,’ I said as I went upstairs with

a beer can in one hand and a glass of wine in the other. In my pocket was the second bar of chocolate in case he needed sweetening. My head was beginning to feel very strange, as if the contents were swelling but my cranium was shrinking. My thoughts were being squeezed out through my nose and mouth, bright red like tomato paste from a tube.

‘All quiet now?’ I asked nodding towards the window. He was lying on his bed watching championship snooker.

‘Pity,’ he said. ‘More cops came and took the one with the awesome bazoongas away. She’s a scrapper, that one. They took the screamer too. That was fun. Another cop and I think it was the Witch-Bitch solicitor went inside, and I ain’t heard a peep for the last ten minutes.’

I remembered Arctic Cherry dragging Connor out of her house by his dungaree straps. While I watched, her fingernails turned into icicles – long, sharp and freezing cold.

I took a slurp from my glass to clear my head and closed my eyes. ‘What about my dog? Did you see Electra?’

‘No dog. No pretty girls. Nothing to send to my girlfriends no more.’ The immovable man was an action junkie.

I woke up when he whacked my foot with his walking frame. ‘Oy, boot-face, don’t you fucking go to sleep on me. Did you leave the door open when you came back in? I swear I heard the downstairs bog flush. Go down and see.’

I went downstairs. Pierre was lying on his back on Billy’s brown corduroy sofa. He was wearing a snow-white teddy over silky French knickers and white ankle socks. I don’t know why he looked more adorable than risible, but he did.

I whispered, ‘If he was watching an all singing, all dancing, all screaming reality show you’d be all right. But he isn’t. He’s watching snooker so he can hear every move you make. Don’t flush the loo again.’

‘I’m beat – I forgot.’ Pierre yawned so wide I could see his supper.

I went to the wet room, flushed the loo again and banged the lid of the cistern. Then I took another can of beer from the kitchen and went back upstairs.

I said, ‘When did you last look at your ballcock?’

‘Are you having me on?’

‘That whatsit in your cistern that’s supposed to close was stuck open. That’s what you heard.’

‘Okay,’ he said, seeming to know less about plumbing than I did.

‘Front and back doors are locked.’ I couldn’t remember how many beers I’d carried upstairs and I didn’t know how long it’d be before he’d be pissed enough not to notice any strange noises. ‘Anything I can do for you before I

turn in?’

He looked at the clock which said 23.57. He said, ‘I’m not supposed to eat after supper.’

‘Okay,’ I said, as any responsible carer would. But I waited.

He said, ‘My daughter keeps a tub of chocolate ice cream in the freezer. Just a bowlful of that won’t make any fucking difference, will it?’

‘I’m not your jailer,’ I said.

The chocolate ice cream reminded me of the chocolate bar melting in my pocket. I unwrapped it and put it into a small pan over a low heat. I crushed six tabs of diazepam between two spoons and stirred the powder in.

I was just pouring the hot chocolate over the ice cream when Pierre said, ‘Hey, save some of that for me.’ He’d crept up on me in his socks so quietly that I nearly spilt the whole bowl.

‘Shshsh!’ I said. But he ignored me and dug another huge scoop of ice cream into a second bowl.

‘I thought you were asleep.’

‘Even in a coma I can smell chocolate sauce,’ he said cheerfully.

‘Shut up! Billy will hear you.’

‘Billy can kiss my ass,’ he said, ignoring me as usual.

So I poured a dollop of melted chocolate into his bowl.

Good night all.

19

Raising The Dead

Chilly Cherry's front door was locked. Her back door was locked too. All the windows were shut tight. Electra was inside, I was outside. Alone. I could have wept but I needed to be silent. I crept back to Billy's house.

Pierre was sprawled on his face on Billy's sofa. Upstairs, Billy was sprawled on his back in bed. Both were snoring.

I collected the two licked-clean ice cream bowls and took them to the kitchen. I even washed up. I didn't want to leave any traces.

It was Pierre's fault. If he hadn't been so noisy I wouldn't have had to slip Billy a diazepam Mickey. If he hadn't been so greedy he wouldn't have nicked half of Billy's bedtime treat.

I sat on the single bed and wondered how I could dose Chilly Cherry's cornflakes. Then I'd have no trouble taking Electra back. After all, it was no more than she deserved. She'd stolen my dog and she'd dosed me with Antabuse. She was the reason Connor would probably be given back to Mrs Cruella Cropper.

In fact, I reasoned, she was responsible for Gamma Dora and Misha drugging Connor. If she hadn't been such a double-dyed troll Pierre and Smister wouldn't have hidden him in the Ambo. And I wouldn't have been forced to drive away with Electra while he was in the back. When you come to think about it clearly and logically, *everything* is Cherry's fault. Why should she be the only one who wasn't drugged against her will?

This was the happy thought that nearly sent me to sleep, but the sound of raised voices and a door slamming tugged me back to life.

I ran downstairs and opened the front door. Standing in the cold was Tantie Débris d'Or wearing only a bra and knickers. The wind lifted her curly grey hair and whirled it like a mad mop around her head. She looked stunned

and utterly unprotected.

An upstairs window opened and a man poked his head out. In a posh voice he called down, 'Mrs Price will give half your clothes to your nephew and the other half to your niece. They can bring them to you when they leave this house. Otherwise, I'm afraid, you'll just have to shiver.'

'Oh how spiteful,' I said, my nipples cramping in sympathy. Poor Tantie.

'Hilarious!' whispered the Torturer. 'You should wake Billy. He'd love this.'

But the man-mountain was unshakably unwakable. So I rummaged in his chest of drawers and found a duvet-sized woolly jumper in the vile orange and brown colours of Halloween. I rolled it into as tight a ball as I could and then threw it out of Billy's bedroom window. Immediately after throwing I ducked behind the curtains. If she saw me she'd want to come in. He was already harbouring one uninvited guest and I didn't think I could get away with a second.

Besides, apart from stealing a few odd hours of sleep I calculated that I might've been awake for two or three days – not enough sleep to engage in a conversation with a distraught Frenchwoman. Besides, with Pierre on the sofa there was nowhere left for her to lie down.

I crept back to the little bed in the spare room.

'Coward,' hissed Satan. 'You're too chicken to take her in out of the cold.'

'Am not,' I said, laying my grateful head on the pillow. 'I want her to ring Cherry's bell and knock on her doors and windows all night long. I just don't want her to freeze to death in the process.'

'Liar, liar, pants on fire,' chanted the Über Lord of Lies. 'You're scared of Cherry. You're afraid that if she knows you're next door she'll run off somewhere with Electra and you'll never find her again.'

'I bet I know why she wants an old greyhound,' I said. 'She wants her because she's *my* old greyhound. She hates me.'

'Don't give yourself so much credit. It isn't about you. You don't actually count at all. It's about her war with Pierre.'

'What war?'

'Her campaign to turn him into the sort of boyfriend she deserves – the one her friends and family would approve of and envy – the one who has no commitments other than to her. So first she makes herself indispensable by persuading him to move in with her. Then she gives his friend, Smister, a place to stay. Smister brings Electra who he's caring for while you're doing time. Now she has power, because she can force him to do her will by threatening to hurt his friends.'

'But I'm not a friend.'

'You're a commitment. Smister's the friend. Electra's a pawn in the game.'

The prize is Pierre's throat bared in total surrender. When he's betrayed Smister, turned his back on you, taken Electra back to the dog's home or had her put down, then she'll know she's won. Game, set and match.'

'That's insane. That's destroying everything she says she loves. Is she really that calculating?'

'You tell me. Why have you been fighting her? It isn't just because she's laid claim to your dog, is it? You can't win, you know. She's one of mine.'

'I thought you wanted *me* to be one of yours.'

'I crave your obedience almost as much as you crave my love.'

'Never – not while you're craving Cherry Price. piss off and let me sleep.'

'You could be dead tomorrow. What then? If there's no god, and if I don't claim you, where will you go?'

'To the dogs.'

'And what fun *that* will be,' he hooted, 'when my daughter Cherry has all the dogs.'

'I need to sleep.'

'You *need* to answer the door, or even drugged Billy will wake up and kick you out.'

I dragged myself back from the jaws of blessed silence to hear persistent rapping on the front door. The wet snorts coming from Billy's room accompanied me downstairs. I opened the door to find Tantie, smothered in the hideous jumper, dancing barefoot on the doorstep.

'Cold,' she said unnecessarily. Her nose was running and her teeth clicked.

I had to let her in, didn't I? And I had to sit her down in the kitchen and give her a mug of hot tea and a bowl of Billy's chicken and noodles. I wanted to ask why Zach and Sylvie hadn't come out with the rest of her clothes but my sleeping tongue couldn't wrap itself around the right words.

'I sleep 'ere?' she said, when she'd finished the soup but was still gripping the hot tea mug between blue and white hands.

'No,' I slurred firmly. 'Not my house.'

'But you ask?'

'No. He's sleeping. I'll try to find you some socks.'

I fumbled my way back upstairs and opened the top drawer of Billy's chest of drawers. Socks in the top, right? Wrong. Pornography – a collection of magazines entitled 'Doctor Butt'n'Boob' – was stored where innocent socks should nestle.

'Orrible,' chattered Tantie who had crept up behind me in bare feet. 'What is wrong wis zis man?'

She had noticed what I'd missed. Billy's regular snorts were now infrequent and irregular. The man-mountain was turning into a blue whale.

Have you ever tried to turn a forty stone man from his back to the recovery position? Even with me pulling and Tantie pushing he didn't budge an inch.

Tantie slapped his face, trying to rouse him. I tried cardiac massage but couldn't find where he'd hidden his heart under fold upon fold of resistant flesh. Nor could I find his phone. Probably he'd gone to sleep lying on it. Every move I made was to the tune of rhythmic demonic laughter. Mr Beau Mangles was dancing a jig just out of sight.

'Shut up, shut up, shut up,' I yelled and ran down the stairs to wake nineteen stone Pierre.

'Wake up, wake up, wake up,' I yelled, pummelling his back until he groaned and shook me off.

'Wha?'

'Get up, get up, get up,' I yelled. 'It's Billy – he's dying.'

'Wha?' His tongue was glued to the roof of his mouth but I found his phone which he'd left tidily on top of his folded clothes.

'Ring for an ambulance,' I shouted into his sleep-deafened ear. 'I don't know the address.'

He rang while struggling into his jeans. Pushed, pulled and protesting he climbed upstairs.

'Wha?' he asked when he saw Tantie holding Billy's nose and attempting mouth to mouth resuscitation.

'What have you done?' he asked.

And suddenly I began to realise that Billy wasn't the only one in danger.

'Nothing,' I said, 'I swear. What could I have done?'

'You'll have to tell the paramedics when they come,' he said. He was looking at a small bottle and a couple of packets on Billy's night stand and checking out the number of empty beer cans. My wine glass was still on the window sill from when we'd been watching next door's drama. Worst of all I still had the diazepam stuffed down my bra.

'Help him,' I said, pushing Tantie out of the way. She'd exhausted herself but at least, I thought, she was no longer cold.

Pierre's huge hands on Billy's body were reduced to normal size. Nevertheless he shoved them rhythmically into Billy's chest.

'Wake the fuck up, you racist asshole,' he muttered as he continued to work. 'Guy calls me a nig-nog and what to I do? I save his goddam worthless life for him.'

'*Mon dieu!*' Tantie cried. '*Ees ze big nun, n'est ce pas?*'

'Dunno what you're talking about,' I said, trying to sidle out of the room.

'Where you going?' Pierre said. 'Move the fuckin' pillows – they're in the

way.'

'Flush the pills down the pan,' whispered the Devil. 'Get rid of the evidence.'

'I'm trying,' I said, snatching the pillows off the bed.

Tantie was reclining on the sofa still breathing hard. She said, 'And you are ze uzzer, is true?'

'Don't be ridiculous.'

'Stay here!' Pierre shouted. 'You're not crapping out on me now.'

'I just want a pee,' I said.

'Not you – *him*. We're losing him.'

'I'll go down and wait for the ambulance.'

'You're going nowhere,' he panted.

'I go,' Tantie said. She opened Billy's cupboard and selected a full length fleecy dressing gown and a pair of sheepskin slippers before going downstairs.

'We're busted,' I said. 'She knows.'

'Not my problem,' Pierre said, pounding on Billy's chest.

'How soon they forget,' said the Lord of Long Memories. 'She can, now she knows you were a nun, put you together with Connor – kidnapping a kiddie – et cetera. Not a small matter, like manslaughter.'

'What manslaughter?'

'Only if he dies,' Pierre said. 'You better pray he doesn't. I need a rest. Come here.'

'I can't,' I said, looking at Billy's blue and yellow face with revulsion.

'Gotta.' Pierre sank down on the sofa holding his head in his hands. 'Cos if you don't, and he croaks, there'll be an autopsy and you'll cop for whatever they find in that sack of guts.'

I knelt on the bed and tried to do what I'd seen Pierre do.

'Put some oomph into it,' he snapped, 'You gotta move the guy, not tickle him.'

I had as many oomphs in me as flamingos have fingers.

'You're doing the world a favour,' crooned Old Harry. 'You're rocking him to sleep. That's the way to die in peace. No one will miss him.'

'I will,' I shouted. 'He's a card-carrying twat, but he didn't kick me out. Not like Hard-hearted Hannah next door.' I shoved where I thought his heart was with all my strength. 'He has girlfriends,' I gasped. 'They'll miss him.'

'Girlfriends?' Pierre asked wearily. 'Who're you shitting?'

'Find his phone and you'll see...'

'Oh, phone sex,' he said dismissively.

'Don't knock it. At least he has sex that he doesn't have to pay for by betraying his friends. At least his girlfriends won't love him so much they

undermine his identity and trash his wardrobe.'

'Okay, okay.'

Just as Pierre said 'okay', Billy snorted once, a long wet disgusting snort, and choked up something vile.

'Fucking ace,' Pierre yelled. He leaped to his feet, galvanised, and sank his enormous fist into Billy's solar plexus. Billy choked again. I shoved with all my strength.

The Devil, almost strangled by laughter, said, 'First she kills them, then she saves them.'

'We gotta turn him or he'll choke,' Pierre gasped. But fortunately for Billy we were interrupted by the experts.

Feet pounded up the stairs. A woman in tangerine coveralls said, 'Which one of you called in?' Then she took in the sight of Billy and said, 'Oh fuck, we'll need a bigger van.'

Her partner said, 'We'll work on him here. What's he taken?'

Pierre showed them Billy's prescription tablets.

The woman said, 'Mirtazapine – oh my, that's a hefty dose. Temazepam *and* Zopiclone? Anything else?'

I got off the bed. I was sweating so I opened the window. While my back was turned to the room I chucked my wineglass out onto the front patch of grass. Then I fished the diazepam out of my underwear and dropped it on the floor next to the bed.

The partner was counting beer cans. He said, 'Having a party?'

'Can you help him?' I asked.

'Someone's been bloody irresponsible,' the partner said. 'Now get out all of you and let us do our job.'

'On *reflection*,' Pierre said, 'I think I saw more pills on the floor – right by your feet, *Sister Angela*.'

I realised, to my dismay, that he'd seen what I'd done reflected in the window. I picked up the pills and gave them to the woman paramedic. I couldn't get out of Billy's bedroom fast enough.

'Café?' Tantie asked when we gathered in the kitchen.

We found an ancient crusty jar of Douwe Egberts. She wrinkled her nose but I set out three mugs and filled the kettle.

Pierre leaned against the door jamb listening to the sounds of violent rescue coming from upstairs. His arms were folded across his chest and he looked like god in judgement.

'Did you see her?' he asked.

'Who?'

'Her name tag says Alicia. Isn't she so fine?'

I'd hardly noticed her but I said, 'Given your appalling taste in women, don't even think about it.'

'Whereas,' sniggered He Who Guides Terrible Choices, 'your taste in men is so terrific that you can look at Alicia's partner like you're a moonstruck girlie.'

Alicia's partner was broad in the shoulder. His hands were square, dependable and obviously gentle. Most seductive of all, he was saving Billy's life and, whether he knew it or not, my neck.

'Enchanting,' said the Teller of Cruel Truth, 'a toothless hag, besotted – my favourite. What a wonderful opportunity for heartbreak. Just like last time.'

'I am not besotted.'

'No, but you are a hag. You were born a hag and you'll die a hag. And you're way too old for the men you yearn for.'

'Shut up and leave me alone.'

Tantie stared at me shocked, but Pierre didn't notice. He said, 'I'm just looking. Don't you love a girl in uniform?'

'Know what, Pierre,' I said. 'You're downright frightening when it comes to women. Did you happen to see her partner's name tag?'

'Colin,' Tantie said, and sighed.

All three of us, it seemed, had given our hearts to saviours.

'I saw your Louis,' I told Tantie to distract her. 'He was with the police at the hospital.'

'Not again,' she said, lifting her hands and shoulders in a gesture of complete resignation.

The kettle boiled. I made three black coffees. We didn't talk about the muffled thumps and crashes we could hear upstairs.

'Louis fight,' Tantie said. 'Always, always the fight. But in his heart he is pure. He love this planet. Man is enemy.'

'He just loves hitting guys.' Pierre came and sat at the kitchen table.

'You are the nuns. Yes?'

'Don't be silly,' I said.

'Yes,' Pierre said. 'We were the nuns. But we're pure of heart too.'

'The little boy?'

'We rescued him, but it went wrong.'

'Yes,' she agreed. 'I try too but...' she shrugged. 'Horrible. Too much bad. I try to rescue Zach and Sylvie. Too far away.'

There was another story, another tragedy that couldn't be told in broken English.

'Why does *everything* have to be so fucked up?' I cried.

'Why do *you* have to be so fucked up?' Pierre asked. 'What were you thinking? Feeding Billy all that booze? And downers – on top of his

prescription shit. Can't you see he's got health problems?'

'He's overweight,' I protested, 'not a moron. This is his house. He's in charge. It's his beer. If he wants to drink it, respect his decision.'

'Great philosophy – coming from an alky.'

'Great rebuke – coming from the guy who's so arrogant about what's best for me that he doses me with Antabuse against my will.'

'Fucking give it up, will you?' Exasperation made him shout and Tantie looked up from her coffee in alarm. 'You're a mess. I'd a thought you'd appreciate the help. And while we're talking about respect, why do you always call Li'l Missy "Mister Sister" and "he"? She ain't a "he". She's got a right to her identity. Who are you to make judgements about her gender?'

'He hasn't had the operation yet so he's what nature made him.'

'Sometimes nature gets it wrong,' Pierre said angrily. 'You gotta let people be who they know they are. It's their decision, not yours.'

'Well, red wine's my decision.' I couldn't match him for anger because I was too tired. But I could stick to my guns. 'Like women's clothes are yours. No one has a right to...'

'Okay, okay.'

'And just cos Billy's forty stone and a bigot doesn't mean he can't get leathered or have girlfriends.'

'Yeah, but you don't have to help him. And you *really* don't get to dose him with downers.'

'*Hah!*' I screeched, and pointed a finger in his face.

'And you don't get to dose me neither.'

'I *didn't* dose you – you came in and stole half his bedtime treat, you greedy bugger.'

'And now, ain't you glad that I did?'

'The reason I *had* to make sure he went bye-byes is *you*. You were so noisy and careless.'

We were still glaring at each other when Colin walked into the kitchen looking gloomy. 'We got him breathing,' he said, 'but we can't wake him up. Normally we'd take him in, but in this case we'd need special equipment. So we're having to monitor him *in situ*. But in case a more urgent shout comes in we got to show one of you what to do.' He looked expectantly at Pierre.

Pierre looked first at Tantie, who was still wearing Billy's dressing gown and sheepskin slippers, and then at me. When neither of us responded, he looked at his watch and said, 'I gotta be at work in three hours.'

'All of you then,' Colin said. 'And does anyone know who Michelle Watson is and why Billy was taking her prescription diazepam?'

20

In Which I Find What I Want But Can't Have It

Pierre jerked his thumb at me and said, 'Don't let her anywhere near the patient. She's, um, kinda accident prone.'

Tantie used the overcrowding in Billy's bedroom to cuddle up to Colin. She still looked like a lunatic, which is, I suppose, what all older women look like when they fancy a paramedic half their age.

Alicia, who filled her coveralls like air in an inflatable doll, was listening to Billy's heart through a stethoscope. She didn't look up when Pierre moved to her side.

Billy, now a healthy colour, seemed to be sleeping peacefully. The room smelled of vomit.

I said, 'Why are surgical gloves blue?'

'Shshsh,' said Pierre.

'So you won't mistake us for hairdressers,' Alicia said. And Pierre laughed too loudly and too long.

I was happy to hear it. Anything that loosened Chilly Cherry's grip on him was welcome. It suddenly occurred to me that he mightn't have given back the keys to her house. So while Colin and Alicia were giving us a lecture on CPR I slid out of the room and downstairs to the front room where Pierre had been sleeping.

I found a big bunch of keys in his jacket pocket – nine keys in all. It's typical, isn't it – there are always too many or too few. Why couldn't he have a neat pink key ring with a label on it which read, 'I'm the key to Ms Frosty's front door: steal me?'

On the other hand, he did have a money clip.

I left Billy's house, wearing Billy's coat, with Pierre's keys in my hand. If

one of them opened a door, I could walk in while everyone was sleeping, reclaim Electra, and blow North Finchley forever.

I could buy a ticket to Piccadilly Circus on a bus or a train and live surrounded by generous strangers. I could watch life roll by from the steps of the National Gallery. I could live at my own pace without the grinding responsibility for abused children or the disabled. No one would shout at me for taking a drink. Electra might occasionally, gently suggest more modest consumption, but she is a *true* friend. She doesn't try to force me into unwelcome action for her own convenience. Provided she gets enough food and sleep, and I get enough red wine, we're perfect companions. When she's by my side, her sweetness keeps the Devil away. He hardly ever attacks while she's guarding me. I can rely on her love and loyalty.

Because how can a woman get up in the morning without love? When her heart beats all alone inside that gaping hole in her chest, how can she put one foot in front of the other?

No one has the right to steal love. Frozen Cherry Pie may think Electra's only a pawn in her long game, but when she stole her she stole the keeper of my heart and soul. Without Electra I have no roll for my rock, no tick for my tock and no ground to stand on.

The kitchen door would be the safest, I figured, because the biggest bedroom, Miss Frigidaire's, was at the front. I went around the side of Cherry's house past the gravel pull-in where the Ambo used to be parked, past her tasteful grey Toyota Yaris, to the back garden gate. The latch opened and in I snuck, a hopeful burglar.

The kitchen door was painted white and in good nick. The lock looked as if it took a three or five bolt key. I had four to choose from. I picked one. It didn't fit at all. Nor did the next. The third magically fitted and turned easily. But the door wouldn't open. Either the icy troll had bolted as well as locked it, or all the recent rain had made the wood swell and it was stuck.

I was just about to put my shoulder to it when the kitchen light went on. I dropped to my knees, my heart flipping like a crack-fuelled gymnast.

I crawled to the side of the house and sat on the wet concrete. I hadn't noticed before but the sky was turning dark bruise grey. Somewhere in the East, behind Cherry's garden shed, dawn was breaking. What time was dawn in November? Was it still November? I didn't know. And what was the day of the week? Would Ms Arctic be going to work or staying home for the weekend?

All you people with computers, phones and tellies would know in an instant. Have you ever wondered how the rest of us get by? Sometimes simple information's crucial – especially when you're breaking and entering.

In my hang-out of first choice, the West End, there's always someone to

ask. Sitting here, some time before sparrow-fart, in a bleak featureless garden, on a bleak featureless road, where the tacky houses hide loneliness, boredom and despair, I despair too. I long for the lights and life, the tourists, the shopaholics, and the world's largest collection of damaged drunks – just like me. We don't hide our disability in a lonely bedroom. We parade it and ask others to pay for it – out of generosity or a need for human contact.

Billy could've died last night in his lonely room. But he wouldn't have been alone. He gave me house room, and I extended the courtesy to Pierre and Tantie. Those of us made homeless by Queen Control were sheltered by oblivious bigoted Billy, and for that reason he didn't die. Pierre would argue that my actions put him in danger in the first place, but who knows if that's true? Pierre doesn't understand the random laws of street karma. What goes around doesn't necessarily come around – nothing so neat – but you may bump into it again, drowning in a pool of its own vomit. Then you can either lend a hand or walk away. Your choice.

But never expect a drunk to repay kindness with kindness. We may be grateful, but that doesn't mean we won't puke on your doorstep.

'Oh shut up and get on with it,' said my Dark Lord. 'Do you want to go in and find your dog or don't you? I've given you the key so why don't you use it?'

'You've given me nothing but bad advice.' But I got stiffly to my feet, knees crackling like splitting branches, and moved round so that I could see in through the kitchen window. The light was on. Zach and Sylvie sat at the kitchen table, knees touching. Smister was making coffee in a cafetière. He wore aqua-coloured lounging pyjamas and a petulant expression. Sylvie was wearing his cream satin negligee. I recognised it from before I went to pokey. Zach wore boxer shorts and a tee that were probably his own.

I ducked down below window level. I couldn't let Smister see me – he was the little enemy in the big enemy's camp. But I could almost smell the coffee. If he were still my friend he'd give me a hot mug I could wrap my freezing hands around. He might even lend me a pair of his fluffy bed socks. My feet were so cold I could barely feel them.

I couldn't sit still in the cutting wind, so I wiped my nose on Billy's sleeve and crept away, following the garden fence. The plan, if you can call it that, was to take refuge in the Snow Queen's garden shed. It was a large, well built shed on a solid concrete footing. From its shelter I could watch the back of the house and be ready for when Electra was next let out.

The plan was thwarted by a sturdy padlock. I sorted through Pierre's keys but none of them fit. Typical, I thought. There would be no comfort or shelter on Queen Mean's property. I went to the back, hoping for a window to force

and of course found no window.

The shed was close to Billy's fence. Hidden, I tested all panels. They were as well built and new as the fence. I'd have to dig a tunnel. If Billy owned a spade. Miss Perfect probably had one but it would be padlocked inside. The Frozen Fortress was well guarded.

I sat with my back to the back of the shed.

'It's only wood,' said the Inverter of Chaos Theory. 'Set light to it. Knock it over.'

'It's too tough.'

'Are you deaf as well as dumb?'

'What?'

'Hello,' said Electra. 'I could smell you a mile off. How come I know you're here but, even though you claim you're looking for me, you fail to find me?'

'But...'

'A bit slow this morning, aren't you? Yes, I'm locked in a shed, waiting for you to rescue me.'

I didn't have the key. So close – so agonisingly close – but I couldn't see her or touch her. I burst into tears.

She snuffled and whined a couple of times just to let me know she was there and sorry too. But I simply couldn't stop myself – I bawled. All the frustration, fatigue and fear caught up and rolled on top of me.

When I could speak again, I said, 'Darling, I'm going to get help. Be strong. Wait. I'll be back.'

Still gulping down tears, I left Cherry's bleak garden, Electra's prison, and went to find Pierre.

21

Negotiate

Pierre was in the kitchen studying a pamphlet. Without looking up he said, 'I can do a course in first aid and CPR. Hey, I could save lives.'

'Yes,' I snuffled, 'you could. Starting now.'

'Alicia reckons I got aptitude.'

'Did the last woman you had the hots for ever lock my dog in her garden shed?'

'Say what?' At last he looked at me.

'Electra's in the shed next door,' I sobbed, 'and there's a dirty great padlock so I can't let her out.'

'You went next door? Why're you such an asshole, girl? You gotta negotiate, persuade, even buy a little bling if you want something Cherry doesn't want you to want. You don't barge in and raid the place. Where's your head?'

'Negotiate, buy bling, then. Do what you have to. Why would she lock Electra in a shed? Why?'

His enormous shoulders slumped. 'So's you or Lil Missy would nag me to negotiate and buy bling.'

'It's freezing out there. I don't even know if Electra's wearing her coat. She's a greyhound, Pierre – greyhounds are very thin-skinned and they don't have an undercoat. They get cold. She could die.'

'Cherry's got this competitive streak a mile wide.' He spread his arms. 'I used to think it was cute.'

'What does she want?'

'Don't start. She wants a new car and a new kitchen. She wants me to take her to New York. She wants me to wear suits and ties and take her to the theatre. She wants me to go to works parties and fancy-pants dinners with her

family. She hates the wigs and gowns. She wants a proper boyfriend.'

'Why did she pick you, then?'

'I don't think it matters who she picks. It's like she's picking raw material she can shape to suit her needs. All I had to do was want to have sex with her. She did all the rest. I coulda walked away after the first time.'

'Why didn't you?'

'I don't *know*.' He almost wailed. 'She put out. It was there on a plate. Easy. Maybe I'm just lazy. It's turned into the most expensive fuck of my life.'

'What time does she go to work?'

'She don't work on a Saturday.'

'*Saturday*?' I laid my head on the table and just shook. The Devil dropped his icy claw onto my shoulder and said, 'You didn't think this would be simple, did you?'

'Wha'd'ya want me to do?' Pierre said in a helpless tone that made me want to slap him.

'Something,' I said. '*Anything*.'

'Cos I ain't talkin' to that bitch – from now on she's dead to me.'

Yesterday she was 'sweetie-honeee'. Now she's dead to him. Men are terrifying. Think of everything the Devil did to me. Yet I still love him, don't I? Dead to me? I wish.

I said, 'If Electra dies of cold in that shed, and I die of a broken heart because of it, we'll all be dead to you. Problem solved.'

'You're such a drama queen!'

'For "drama queen" read hysterical,' the Devil sneered. 'It's a really good way of controlling women. I thought it up millennia ago. It's one word I've never had to improve on. You should remember it – you heard it often enough as a child.'

'Oh shut up!' I cried.

'And another thing – that racist bastard you nearly killed last night – ain'tcha interested in how he's doin'?' He'd been taking self-righteous lessons from frozen Miss Always-in-the-right.

'The ambulance has gone,' I said, raising my head. 'And you're down here planning a change of career. So either Alicia and Colin took Billy away or he's okay.'

'Tantie's sittin' with him. Why haven't those kids brought her clothes over?'

'If they leave they'll be homeless. Same as Smis.... Little Smissy. He gave Electra to your chilly Honeee cos he was so scared of having nowhere to live. She's dangerous, Pierre. She's killing Electra.'

'It's so weird. She works for one of those public service unions. I kinda

thought if she had a fault it was cos she was so straight and white bread.'

'Evil can be banal and boring.'

'Y'know, I had those wigs custom-made,' Pierre said, running his hand over his perfect mahogany scalp. 'Cost me thousands. Ruined.'

'Concentrate, Pierre. How do I rescue Electra? Is the kitchen door bolted? Where does your frosty friend keep the key to the shed?'

'Gimme back my keys and money or I won't tell you diddly. Did you think I wouldn't notice?' He glared at me.

'Tough enough when you're dealing with me,' I complained. 'How come you can't stand up to Ms Arctic Arse?' I managed to liberate what I hoped was a ten pound note before I retrieved the money clip from Billy's coat pocket and handed it to him. He didn't count it. If he was that comfortably off I should have doubled the take. 'Speaking of being ripped off,' I said hastily, 'didn't you say you were paying Ms Grabbit's mortgage?'

'Shit – how the hell did that happen? All I did was offer to help with the groceries. Then I moved in and as soon as I had nowhere of my own... '

'And Smis... Little S... Missy moved in... '

'... with Electra, so she wanted rent for the two of us and a dog, plus the space for the van... I guess that's how it happened.'

'Step by tiny step, while your man-mind was on other things,' I said, having been caught that way myself while my woman-mind was occupied by the one-time-only offer of someone to love. 'Then she'd make you get rid of Smister and Electra – without you noticing – and you'd be left with the mortgage and no friends. I hope she didn't make you sign some sort of term covenant?'

Pierre looked horrified.

Long ago, in another life, I worked in a building society. I dealt with mortgages, term agreements and all the trimmings every day of my working life – until the Devil contaminated my timidly honest nature. I said, 'You'd better let me look at the papers.'

Pierre stared at me, at my baggy, grubby tracksuit, swamped by Billy's ginormous coat. He saw my unwashed hair, my swollen hands, my neglected face. He almost laughed.

'I didn't always look like this,' I said sorrowfully. 'You show me how to rescue Electra and I'll get you out of any mortgage agreement you made with Madam Exploitation next door.'

His phone started buzzing like a bee on a windowpane, making me jump. Sometimes I forget you can communicate with the world outside my head.

Pierre said, 'It's her.' His giant thumb hovered over the screen.

I said, 'Dead to you, but only till she calls?'

He frowned at me till the phone stopped buzzing. Then he picked it up and listened to the message. 'She wants to meet,' he said. 'She says we can't leave it like this. She says I gotta go to the house cos she's got intruders who won't leave. She says she needs my help.'

'Yeah,' I said. 'She needs a bouncer, a big strong tough guy to kick Zach and Sylvie out into the cold like Connor and poor Tantie. She needs a car and her mortgage paid regularly. In other words, she needs a sucker.'

'Not helping,' he said.

'Wrong. I wish someone had said the same to me before I followed the Devil down to Hell. "Sucker" is a polite word for what *I* became.'

'You'da listened?'

Not a popsicle's hope in Hades. The Devil was my one chance of escape. Listen to *my mother*? Never in a million years. That's why I have a prison record.

'Result!' the Devil said gleefully.

'You won't be much of a catch for a lovely generous woman like Alicia if you fold every time Cherry Tart gives you orders.'

'You *really* ain't helping.'

'Well at least negotiate,' I said, in despair. 'She works for a union, she understands negotiations. Get Electra out of the shed and give her back to me. After that you'll help her. And after *that* I'll help you with the mortgage.'

His phone pinged and he picked it up. 'Text' he said, 'from Li'l Missy.' He handed the phone to me.

The message read, 'pleaseplseplse cm hom. She gt my meds. I scrd.' It took me a couple of minutes to un-jumble what Pierre had understood immediately. He was already buttoning his jacket.

'Don't do this, Pierre – you'll lose the only bargaining chip you have. And I'll lose Electra.'

'Li'l Missy's my friend,' he said simply.

'Text him back...'

'*Her!*'

'Text her back, suggest something else. She doesn't know you're next door, does she? She mustn't know you're next door or that I am, or Tantie.' I was on my feet hanging on to his sleeve. I said, 'Smissy's helpless against Cherry – she'd sell her soul for a good bathroom mirror. You know that's true. I'm not blaming her, Pierre, but she's so insecure. She'll do anything for safety.'

He hesitated. I took a firmer grip on his sleeve. 'Little Missy needs rescuing too,' I said. 'He's been coerced into betraying his friends. All the Troll will do is to corrupt hi... her into further treachery. And then she'll kick him... her out. Or persuade *you* to kick him out. She's implacable. And you *know* Missy's not

strong enough.’ I nearly said, ‘Cherry’s the Devil’s daughter – she learned all her tricks from him.’ But I managed to stop myself. Pierre’s views on the Devil are mundane, sceptical and not at all helpful to me.

He said, ‘We don’t know what’s happening. We don’t know who all’s in the house.’

Unless the solicitor was still there it was probably just Zach, Sylvie, Smister and the Ice Queen. I went to the front door and looked out. It was a chilly, dark grey morning. I scanned the road for police cars. My guts felt hollow and raw but my head was full of wallowing sludge. I needed it to be clear and logical. I needed to know how Electra would advise me. Back in the kitchen I unscrewed the top of the last bottle of wine and poured what I hoped was a ladylike slug. I didn’t want to do it in front of Pierre but here he was, still at the table, not going anywhere. He rolled his eyes, but I drank a restrained gulp.

Perhaps it was drinking from a glass that made me more aware. I knew it was breakfast time. I knew I was asking Pierre to do something that went against his soft-hearted instincts. I said, ‘I promise I’ll only drink from a glass from now on. I promise to do my absolute best to keep it under control till I’ve got Electra back and I’m out of your hair.’

He rubbed his shiny scalp with a hand the size of a shovel and grinned at me sourly.

I said, ‘Have I ever promised anything before?’

‘Not to me. No.’

‘Well then?’

‘Promises come cheap. You just ain’t capable.’

‘I know,’ I said, suddenly crushed under the weight of loss. Loss of logic, sanity, reliability and my best and only true friend. I used to be capable. I used to be able to keep promises. ‘I can only promise to try.’

‘We-ell...’

‘Up in Birmingham,’ I began, ‘the woman I cleaned bogs with asked me to check on her little boy, Connor. I never promised, Pierre, but I went anyway. You know what I found.’

‘Yeah,’ he said, ruefully, ‘and I know what followed.’

‘Good intentions,’ I said sadly. ‘But it all went shit-shaped. And then it turned truly evil when the cops brought Connor’s grandma to Cherry’s house to identify him. *And Cherry kicked him out.* She didn’t tell the cops why his appalling nan is the last person to give him to. She just dragged him out by the straps of his dungarees. It was a cold night, Pierre, and he was crying his eyes out. She *knew* why you snatched him. She *knew* what his nan had done to him but she just said, “Take him away.” And away he got took. They put him in the

same car as the woman who stubbed her cigarettes out on him.'

I paused to let information he really didn't want to accept dodge past the defenders in his brain – namely that the woman he'd been as close to as two people can be was unfeeling, cold and heartless. The red wine was calming. The sight of another three undrunk inches in the glass gave me space to breathe. And manipulate.

His head sank into his hands. I was about to follow up the advantage when the doorbell rang.

'Stay here,' I said. 'Don't make a sound.' I was afraid of cops, social workers and Billy's daughter. But when I opened the front door I found Alicia, out of uniform, but still carrying an instrument case.

She gave me a morning-fresh minty smile and said, 'I've come to check on the patient.'

'Where's Colin?'

'Gone home to bed. He's such a lightweight.'

Hiding my disappointment I showed her into the kitchen and went upstairs to check on the patient myself. I thought she might do better work downstairs, using her gorgeous smile to re-unite Pierre with his lost humanity.

Upstairs, Billy was mumbling, 'Doorbell, doorbell,' through sleep-swollen lips and a tongue as dry as a woolly sock. Tantie was now wearing two flannel lumberjack shirts. The second one was tied like a sarong around her waist. She was curled up on Billy's couch, fast asleep.

'Mornin' sunshine,' I said brightly, turning my back on my own exhausted brain. I handed him a bottle of water and watched while he glugged it down. At last his half-opened eyes fell on Tantie.

'Who-zat?'

'Tantie,' I said. 'Last night she helped save your life.'

'Why's she weaning my shirt?'

'You puked on hers.' I sensed I could give birth to an origin myth. 'Billy, you took too many downers and too many beers last night. You passed out and kind of stopped breathing. I couldn't move you or get to your phone so I had to go next door for help. One of the paramedics has come back to see you. Do you want to use the bathroom or shall I show her up now?'

'Oh shit,' he said, and began the slow painful journey out of bed.

He wasn't very steady on his feet and I was afraid of being fallen on. But he instructed me to find him clean pyjamas and to change the sheets. That's when I discovered that, some time during his near-death episode, he'd wet the bed.

'Oh joy,' I said, and woke Tantie up to help me. My sympathy for her exhaustion didn't go that deep.

Back in the kitchen I found Pierre and Alicia, knee to knee, deep in talk. His phone was buzzing, unanswered on the table between them. He was not talking about leaving for work or visiting his girlfriend next door.

Alicia got up when she saw me and said, 'I was telling Pierre that I've informed Billy's GP about last night's incident. So expect a visit. But I thought I might as well give him the once-over while I was on my way home – just to put your minds at rest.'

'So sweet,' Pierre said. His smile was as daisy-white as hers.

'Yeah,' I said by way of endorsement. 'Billy can't remember what happened last night. He's only just met Tantie and he doesn't know Pierre's here...'

'Yeah,' Pierre said. 'Maybe keep that to yourself – he ain't a fan of mine.'

'But you kept him alive while you were waiting for us.'

'He doesn't know that yet,' I said.

'He's got a problem with colour,' Pierre explained charitably.

Alicia and Pierre exchanged a look of complete understanding. I began to like Pierre again.

When Alicia went upstairs I took another civilised gulp from my glass and then shoved Billy's soiled sheets and pyjamas into his washing machine. There my fragile grasp on competence broke. Faced with too many dials, buttons and choices I had to ask Pierre to set the machine and switch it on. He didn't mind. He didn't seem to mind about anything any more. He even seemed to tolerate *me*. He certainly didn't wonder, quite reasonably, how he could rely for help with his mortgage on someone who freaked out about the number of buttons on a washing machine. D cups seem to render a bloke oblivious to practical concerns.

'Alicia wouldn't drag a sad, damaged kid out like a sack of garbage,' I said, 'or lock a kind, beautiful, old greyhound in a shed on a winter's night.'

'She would not,' he agreed.

'Or frighten your best friend to death by withholding his meds, just to force you to help her.'

'Shee-it, no.' He suddenly came down to earth and listened to the messages on his phone.

There were two, increasingly forceful calls from the Queen of Coercion, and a new text from Li'l Missy.

'Crappo-crappola,' he said. 'Okay, here's what I'll do.' His thumbs were big as a Rottweiler's paws but they danced gracefully over the screen on his phone. 'I said: tell her I'll help but only after you confirm she's given your meds back.'

I felt panic rising from my guts to my throat. 'What about Electra?'

'Dumb-ass,' he said. 'How did I find out about Electra in the shed if Cherry's not supposed to know we're next door?'

‘But what’s to stop her threatening Missy and making him text back confirming she’s given hi... her the meds and then not giving them to her?’

‘You out of sight paranoid about her,’ he said. ‘She ain’t that devious.’

‘She uses your friends and innocent dogs to manipulate you – do what she wants or she’ll hurt someone. Even a three-week-old kitten would call that devious.’

‘Know what? You should get some sleep. You look like you been ridden out hard and put away wet.’

‘Know what? Until you find a place of your own where Missy can stay, you’re dependent on Chillee Honee next door and you can’t protect anyone let alone a dog and a baby.’

‘Why am *I* the protector?’ he asked plaintively. ‘Who’s protecting *me*?’

‘I am,’ I said, to my own astonishment. ‘I brought you in out of the cold last night, and I’ll help you with the mortgage.’

‘Everyone thinks, cos I’m big, I’m responsible.’

‘Yeah, right, Sister Diana Ross of the Order of Sweet Charity. You’re responsible all right. Responsible for all the fuck-ups happening in my life since I got out.’

‘Know what?’ he said. ‘When we nunned up I felt this, like, huge release. And I thought I hadn’t had so much fun in months.’

‘Those wouldn’t be the months you’d spent living next door, would they?’

He ignored me. ‘Then it went all Afghanistan and Syria.’

‘Connor’s not one of your fantasies. He’s a real live suffering little kiddy. Real people get really hurt, badly hurt, in the real world.’

‘Yeah, well, you tell that to Billy who you almost wasted.’

‘The Devil...’ I began, but then Alicia walked into the kitchen, D cups first, and what was left of Pierre’s attention went galloping away over the horizon.

‘How’s Billy,’ he asked, as if he really cared.

‘Still groggy,’ Alicia said, displaying a fine command of medical jargon. ‘He needs an eye kept on him and plenty of fluids but no alcohol.’ She gave me and my glass of red an appraising glance. ‘He needs his GP to go through his medications with him. Clearly he’s overusing and should cut down.’ She stared at the stacks of canned soup and rice pudding before continuing. ‘It’s a waste of my breath to suggest he eats more fresh fruit and veg, isn’t it?’

I said, ‘He gets Meals on Wheels too.’

‘Oh, okay. They’re not bad on healthy diets. But...’ She shrugged. Billy’s dietary problems were probably almost as overwhelming to her as they were to me. We all shrugged.

‘He’s shouting for his breakfast,’ she continued. ‘And I should go home to bed.’

Pierre's phone rang.

22

In Which Billy's Daughter And My Mother Make Surprise Visits

Tantie slept on the sofa. Billy slept in his bed. I left an urgent message on the RSPCA's helpline. There was nothing else I could do to help Electra or myself till Pierre got back. Then I lay down in the small back bedroom.

I dreamed that I was all alone in Holloway prison. There was no shouting, no screaming, no raucous laughter, no doors slamming. That's what you remember most from chokey – the sound of slamming doors and the squeal of the screws' rubber soles as they walk up and down the corridors. But I was by myself in endless silent corridors and empty cells. Ants and beetles crawled on the floors and up the walls. There was something urgent I should be doing. Cleaning? I couldn't remember. I tried to find someone to tell me what to do. And began to panic.

Then, at the end of one of the corridors, I suddenly found a picture window. Outside was a view of a suburban garden. I still couldn't hear anything but I could see people enjoying a barbecue on a bright summer day. There were steaks and burgers on the grill, fat golden cobs of sweet corn and full glasses of ruby-red wine. Children played in a paddling pool. Pierre was costumed in a blue and crimson silk tea dress. Little Missy's summer frock was gauzy and floaty. Cherry wore a pink baseball cap with the word Winner on it and showed Alicia the best way to flip burgers. Billy, in white satin pyjamas, lay on a sun lounger. Tantie, Zach, Sylvie and the angry one were singing a *capella*. Electra slept in the sun, sleek, well fed and beautiful.

They were all friends, having a good time in Cherry's garden. Cherry's barbecue, Cherry's friends. Cherry's dog. But I knew that somewhere, underneath the grass, lay the body of a scarred, distorted little boy who'd died of starvation.

Cherry was the only person there who knew I was watching from my prison window. She looked up at me, smiling her tight, frozen smile, and spoke. I could hear her clearly. She said, 'I won. Fuck off.'

The doorbell rang. I jerked awake and went down to find the doctor on the doorstep. I let him in. He gave me a curious look and said, 'Do I know you?'

'No,' I said, although he was the one Pierre took me to see – the one who prescribed Antabuse and antipsychotics. Of *course* he was a conniving, manipulative grot-brain – he was Cherry's doctor too.

'Billy's upstairs,' I said helpfully. Where else would he be?

'I know my way,' he said huffily – as if I'd beaten him to a difficult diagnosis.

I did not offer him stale coffee, chicken soup or rice pudding. He didn't deserve it.

Tantie stumbled out of the living room, lumberjack shirts flapping, to the downstairs wet room. Which reminded me that I hadn't had a proper wash for... how many days?

I went to the kitchen and poured myself a modest glass of wine and saw with concern that I was running out. This was not as worrying as it might have been because of Billy's beer and the claggy remains of sweet sherry. Also I had Pierre's ten pound note in my pocket. Even so a spasm of panic gripped my guts and brain. I should be out with Electra in the West End collecting money for the next bottle. Sometimes, some righteous citizen will say, 'Why don't you get a job?' Or, 'I have to earn my own living – you should too.' They just don't understand how much time and effort go into sitting on the ground in all weathers, looking ill and pathetic. Or hustling in the rain when everyone, including me, wants to be elsewhere. But it's our job, and Electra and I do it the best way we can.

You may disagree. But it's an honest living. I ask, you give, or not. It's up to you. Is every single coin in your purse or pocket already spoken for? You may feel poor or stressed and resent my need. You may see me and pretend you haven't, furious that I've made you feel ungenerous. You might not see me at all. It could be you're angry enough to give me a lecture about drink, drugs and laziness. I don't mind – maybe you want someone to notice *you* and understand how hard you work. Perhaps you aren't appreciated at home or in the office. Or maybe you drop a coin in my hand as you hurry by. You might even bend down to pet Electra. Thank you – she likes that. Now and then you may crouch, stroke Electra and say to me, 'Hey, how're you doing today?' Thanks again, I like that too.

I don't wash much – because I can't. And I don't rinse out a wine glass — because there isn't one. Nobody cares. That's freedom.

I live from one day to the next, from one bottle to the next. There is a clear, inescapable purpose to every day. Food and drink for Electra and me. Life is pared back to basics. I do only what is absolutely necessary. Can you say the same when you're dusting the do-dabs on your mantle piece, valeting your car, worrying about what to wear today?

And yeah, the reason I can stand here appreciating a way of life I did not in fact choose for myself is because I'm trespassing in Billy's warm kitchen under false pretences. I'm also sipping, ladylike, a glass of red wine bought with fraudulently obtained cash.

'I like you better when you're kidding yourself,' the Lord of the Lies whispered. 'People who lie to themselves are so much easier to manipulate into lying to *everyone*. Drink up.'

'Know what?' I said. 'I'm fed up with you telling me what to do.' I took one more sip and then put the glass, still half full, in the fridge.

Listen to me. *I put an unfinished glass of wine in the fridge.* Have you any idea at all what that means?

'Yeah,' Satan sniggered. 'It means you'll have to get it out again after you fail to leave it alone for ninety seconds.'

'Belt up, knob-head,' I said.

'Excuse me?' said the doctor. 'Were you talking to me?'

I was about to deny it when the front door opened and a woman with three children walked in. 'Who the hell are you?' she said to me. 'What's going on? Why're you here, doctor?' She was dressed in a navy blue anorak and jeans, and carrying a Pyrex dish the size of a tennis court full of what looked like cottage pie. The three children, two boys and a girl, were all dressed identically to their mother and each of them carried two stuffed Iceland carrier bags.

The doctor said, 'Hello, Mrs Wilton. I'm sorry, but your father had another one of his turns last night.'

'Oh?' She put her pie on the kitchen table. 'Shouldn't he be in hospital? Kids, the ice cream's melting. Is he all right now? In the freezer – you should know by now. Why wasn't I told?'

'I wasn't informed myself until an hour ago,' the doctor said stiffly. 'The situation was assessed and treated by an emergency crew. I...'

'I know,' she interrupted. 'They weren't carrying "special equipment" for the morbidly obese. I've heard it all before. Who's she?'

'A neighbour,' he said, looking at me as if he didn't quite believe himself. 'She called the emergency service when she couldn't get a response from Billy.'

'What're you going to do about it?' She wasn't listening to anything but her own voice. 'Dad should be in special ground floor accommodation. Sheltered

living. That sort of thing.'

'He's on the Social Services list.' The doctor adopted the tone of someone who knew all about Billy and all about lists. He looked as if he'd run out of optimism years ago.

'Well, I'm not satisfied,' Mrs Wilton said. And she too sounded like she'd used those words a million times before on a million occasions.

'I'm afraid I can't stay. I have to attend another call.' And off he went. He just managed to avoid Tantie who was emerging from the wet room with one towel wrapped around her head and another one around her shoulders.

The children nudged each other. Mrs Wilton said, 'What's going on?'

Tantie disappeared into the living room and closed the door.

I felt as if my head would explode if you stuck a pin in it. The thing about prison is that you can go for weeks on end without anything happening at all. The chaos of the last few days was taking its toll.

I said, 'We're only staying till we know Billy's okay.' I jerked my thumb at the living room door and went on, 'Your dad threw up all over her so she hasn't got anything to wear till...' I pointed to the washing machine. It was the best I could do on the spur of the moment to explain the presence of a nearly nude middle-aged woman in her father's house. 'I expect you'll want to see your dad now and give him his lunch.'

'Tea.' She gave me another superior look.

'Can we go now?' her daughter said.

'I have to get home and give this lot *their* tea. All I seem to do is stuff food in people's mouths. You can warm the pie up for dad, can't you?'

'Aren't you going up to see him?' It was to my advantage that she cared so little. But I was surprised.

'Believe me,' she said, 'the only thing he wants from me is in that dish.' She collected the children and left. The children after their brief reaction to Tantie's state of undress had settled back into silent apathy.

'Don't you want to see your grandpa?' I murmured to their retreating backs. I didn't understand but I supposed the pie and ice cream represented some sort of love and commitment. I went upstairs.

Billy said, 'What did she bring me?' He didn't even use his daughter's name.

'Cottage pie,' I said. 'Look, can I get something straight here? Your daughter...'

'Half of it now,' he said, 'half tomorrow.'

'But is it okay if Tantie stays here for a few days too?'

'Talk to me after supper,' he said. 'And turn the TV to face me. I'm not getting up again today – I'm too weak.'

‘No,’ I said, sensing another advantage. ‘I need to know now. She helped save your life, and she’s homeless.’

‘The connection is?’ His fingers, drumming on the back of his mobile phone, sounded like a tiny galloping horse.

‘She was staying next door,’ I said. ‘She came to help me when you passed out, and now your favourite neighbour’s locked her out and won’t even let her have her clothes back.’

‘No shit!’ He said, suddenly interested. ‘What the fuck’s going on? The Witch-Bitch is such a control freak – she’s so sodding organised. I didn’t dream last night, did I? With the cops and that bit of all right with the big knobs and knockers?’

Oh the women men choose to fancy! Have they no criteria for selection other than big boobs and spread legs? Mrs Cropper – a drunken, stoned, abusive grandmother, and Cherry – a coercive, frozen-faced, hard-hearted dog thief – had no trouble landing men.

I said, ‘You didn’t dream it. Your neighbour’s coming unglued.’

‘She used to put notes through my door about me not cutting the grass in the front. Or when anyone parked outside her house – like it isn’t a public road. Not just me – the other neighbours too. I’m not the only one who wouldn’t mind if she came down a peg or two.’

‘So its okay if Tantie stays?’

‘Not for long. She’s old, isn’t she, got grey hair?’

‘You’ve seen her.’

‘I’m not feeding her – she buys her own food.’

I turned his TV to face him and left before he forced me to slap him.



‘What I do now?’ Tantie asked. She was in despair – not just because her life was desperate, but because she couldn’t express it in her own language.

‘Heat up half this pie.’ I pointed to the pie and then to the oven. ‘Feed Billy. *Il dit que* you can *restez chez lui* for a few days.’

‘I have permission?’ She got up and stared blankly at the pie and the grubby oven. Her hair was clean, but it floated, confused, around her anxious little face. In her two shirts she looked even more demented than I did. But her housing problem could be shelved for a few days. As could mine. Unless we royally pissed off our host. Or the Social Services or the cops moved us on. Because the cops *would* be coming back. That’s something you can bet your life savings on. Always. Unlike the RSPCA whose job it is to prevent cruelty to animals. Where were they now I needed them?

I had another problem. Only two and a half glasses of red wine had slid down my gullet since... since when? Now that I was counting my consumption in glassfuls rather than in bottlefuls I was finding counting easier. But I was feeling quite ill – a bit queasy, headachy, panicky and unsteady on my legs.

I sat at the kitchen table with my head in my hands trying to reconstruct what had happened to my poor battered body since leaving the comfort and safety of Her Majesty's chokey. Kicked by kids, knocked over by a bus, knocked over by a man, poisoned with Antabuse and prescription drugs and deprived of sleep. Worst of all I had no idea of how to rescue Electra. Anxiety for her well-being gnawed into the lining of my stomach like pure acid.

I was supposed to sit quiet and keep out of trouble till Pierre got back. But Pierre had been gone all afternoon. I'd done my very best, but all I had to show for my heroic restraint was one empty wine bottle and an empty sweet sherry bottle. Either I'd be forced to steal from Billy again or I'd have to go out to buy supplies with the money I'd stolen from Pierre. Begging is an honourable profession compared with hanging around someone else's house with no money in your pockets for essentials. And I had no choice but to hang around Billy's house because Electra was trapped next door.

I couldn't wait any longer. At five-thirty I covered myself with Billy's coat and tumbled out into a drizzle so fine and cold it felt like all my clothes were wet. Scurrying, head down, collar up, I risked passing in front of the Ice House. Its face was blank – a clone of the house opposite, a clone of all the blank-faced houses in the whole street.

My right hand was clamped around Pierre's ten pound note. My left hand searched the dark and empty air by my side where Electra should have been.

'Get used to it,' the Devil said. In the cold maze of identical houses the Devil sounded like a woman. I stopped and looked around. I was alone.

'Get used to it,' she said again. 'I can come to you in any form I like. I have no limits. You're just sexist, and you don't have enough imagination, do you? I'm an equal opportunities emanation from all of humanity – and a few cats, rats, bats and kumquats thrown in for good measure. Call me Mother.'

'Fuck off,' I said. But I knew he was right. How else could he know all my weaknesses so thoroughly? And it was true the enemy, the one who wanted to destroy me and my only friend, was a woman. This time, the force, the coercion was not being applied by a man. This time I was the victim of female coercion and manipulation. Oh joy – a woman can compete with total equality in a sport none of us should be engaged in.

I didn't like it. The Evil One was supposed to be male. He was what the angel Lucifer became. He used to be an angel, and god only made bloke angels. His face was the face of my ex-demon lover. He was the traitor, the deceiver,

the destroyer of all my dignity, honesty and the last remnants of trust and femininity. Was he, even in the shape of the Devil, deserting me again?

‘I told him you were stupid,’ Mother informed me coldly. ‘You still love him, don’t you? I’m right, as always – you *are* stupid. Big feet, clumsy hands, inadequate brain – that’s my girl.’

‘If you’d been a...’

‘What? Better mother? Blaming your mother are you? The last excuse of the abject failure. How banal. Whereas, of course, I blame you. You were corrupt and a liar even as a child. My husband left me because of you.’

I used to wish that the Devil would disappear magically and never come back. But as tormenters go he was preferable to the one who called herself Mother. ‘Shut up,’ I muttered, almost inaudibly through clenched teeth – much as I had when she was alive and we were living together in Acton.

By now I had reached the charity shop that marked the boundary between the residential area and what passed for a high street in this arid neck of the woods. There were three charity shops and a Pound Place in the space of three hundred yards. None of them sold red wine so I ignored them. Then there was a Mini Mart which advertised cheap wine. That was what I was aiming for. But right next door to the Mini Mart was a hardware shop. ‘Closing Down!’ the sign said. ‘Everything Must Go!’

And there, right in front of the untidy display, was a bolt cutter. Price: ten pounds.

Ten pounds. Exactly what I had – Pierre’s ten pounds in the pocket of Billy’s coat. Ten pounds with which I could buy a bottle of cheap red wine and still have enough left over to buy eggs or beans and bread for Tantie.

Or I could chop the padlock off a shed door, free Electra and then hit Cherry Ice-Price over the head with a bolt cutter.

‘But,’ sneered Mother, ‘you’ll never have the courage to trespass and vandalise pretty Cherry’s property unless you have a swig of your favourite tippie.’

While I was dithering, a Volvo Estate car pulled up outside one of the charity shops. A woman got out of the driver’s side, glanced furtively up and down the dark street, then, quick as a fox, opened the hatchback and threw two rubbish bags out onto the pavement. She couldn’t get away fast enough.

‘Don’t procrastinate,’ Mother said. ‘You’re wasting valuable drinking time. You *know* you’ll never have the guts even to make up your timid little mind until you get some of that good red tonic down your throat.’

‘Bugger off,’ I said loudly. But when I looked round there was no one to hear me, just as there’d been no one to see the woman in the Volvo Estate.

The hand-written notice on the charity shop door said, ‘Please don’t leave

donations outside when we're closed. Come back when we're open. Otherwise bags will be vandalised or rain soaked and your precious gifts will be ruined or stolen.'

Too right. There's a whole section of the under-society who can't afford even charity shop prices.

'Have you no pride?' Mother said. 'I would rather have died than stoop so low.'

'You *did* die,' I said, 'so stop bugging me.' I really didn't want to hear her. Her voice made breathing difficult.

The first bag I opened was full of baby and toddler clothes. They looked like pretty good quality but I could tell by the smell that they hadn't been washed. The Volvo woman wasn't donating clothes to charity, she was having a clearout and couldn't be bothered to wait for rubbish collection day.

The next bag was full of unwashed women's clothing. I picked up the whole thing and then re-crossed the road to the Mini Mart.

'Stealing from a charity shop,' Mother remarked. 'No wonder you can't live with yourself when you're sober.'

I tried to ignore her as I pushed through the Mini Mart door. And, as I turned unerringly towards the drinks aisle I tried to ignore the mental picture of a bolt cutter, price ten pounds only.

23

What Is Love?

Tantie tipped the contents of the bag onto the kitchen floor. She looked at the clothes and burst into tears. Maybe there was nothing there to her taste. Maybe there was nothing in her size. But eventually she wiped her eyes on Billy's sleeve and put her arms around me.

Together we pawed through all the low-end high street brands. She picked a blue shirt, a grey sweater, a black viscose and wool jacket and black jeans probably a size too large. They were nearly clean. I picked a black tracksuit, black leggings and a thick knee-length green sweater. It had some baby's up-chuck stains on the front which Tantie sponged off. Some of the garments were too dirty and mauled to think about. Those went straight back in the bin bag. Some we put in the washing machine along with what we had been wearing for two days. Tantie was not phased by the complexity of Billy's white goods.

A woman with small children yo-yos between sizes. Our lazy benefactress had jettisoned her whole weight history. Sometimes she had a waist, sometimes she didn't. She'd had big boobs and she'd also been nearly flat-chested. She'd dressed to hide and she'd dressed to display. Tantie and I were very lucky.

Two crucial gaps in our new wardrobes were underwear and shoes. But it was nearly bedtime and we were too tired to care.

At one o'clock, Tantie came in to sleep on the floor of the little spare room. She made me understand that Billy had gone to sleep watching porn on his computer. 'Bang, bang, bang till ze woman bleed,' she told me by way of illustration. Which made me want to do the same thing, with a golf club, to Billy's head.



I'd hardly gone back to sleep when I heard Pierre coming, too noisily, through the front door. I hurried downstairs to hush him and lock the door behind him. He smelled of a musky perfume and rum. He had not rescued Electra.

'Where have you been?' I snarled, herding him into the kitchen. Because even if I'd been born without a nose I'd have noticed that it was not Cherry's perfume. Miss Frozen Farts went in for something more flowery and pink. What Pierre was wearing smelled of crimson mixed with burnt caramel and orange.

'I gotta get my head down,' he complained.

'Not so fast. Where's Electra? Did you even go next door?'

He set a large backpack down on the kitchen table and unzipped it. I had a sudden mad hope that Electra would bound out, into my arms, saying, 'Ta-da! Surprised you, didn't I?'

Instead he reverently lifted out a biscuit-coloured glamour wig which he set carefully on a crude polystyrene head.

'Li'l Missy saved it for me,' he said. 'She hid it under her bed while Cherry was murderin' the others. Course I went next door. I done a deal. We – you and me – gotta give the ambulance to Zach and Sylvie. But that's tomorrow. I can't think about it now.'

'You gave away my home, and all she gave you was her word?'

'Look, she thought I could just pick Zach and Sylvie up by the scruff and evict them. She still has this picture of me as some kinda bouncer. She thinks cos I'm big I should be violent an' protect her from all comers. Well, it ain't like that. *I* ain't like that. Never was. Never will be. End of.'

'What she wants from a man...' I began, thinking of all my own dead hopes and dreams.

'Whatever it is,' he said, 'I ain't it. After that first time with her I was upfront – I told her who I was an' what I do. And she pretended to find it "different and exciting". But when push came to shove she wanted the stereotype – the "proper boyfriend". Looks like she still does.'

And I was making the same mistake – I thought, because he was a big guy who had some sort of influence over Miss Pinkie Poison, he would rescue my dog. I should take the time and trouble to rethink Pierre entirely. After all, guys who actually *want* to look like women, and for a short time at least to *be* women for whatever reason, are rare birds with very different feathers. Most men would rather die.

I said, 'Put the wig on, Pierre. I want to see you in it.'

He gave me a strange look, as if he was re-assessing me too. Then he

grinned and took the wig away to the mirror in the wet room.

When he came back he was still dressed in jeans, a flannel shirt and no make-up – but he was a woman. The same magic that made him a hundred times more convincing as a nun than I was made him more convincingly female than I would ever be.

I sat across the kitchen table from him with my chin in my hands. He sat, perfectly relaxed, seeming to enjoy my gaze.

‘Yes,’ I said at last. ‘Magic. I hope you showed this to Alicia.’

‘You ain’t even hammered,’ he said in a tone of wonder that matched my own. ‘Sure I showed her. She didn’t drop onto no live rail about it neither.’

‘Good for her,’ I said. ‘Pierre, did you see Electra?’

‘No,’ he said sadly. His voice almost sweet. ‘You’re right. Cherry said she was at the vet’s for the night with a cold. But when she went to the bathroom Missy told me she was lying. She kept Electra in the house while the kid was there cos that was the only way they got any peace. But after she got rid of Connor she said she didn’t want to be reminded of you and how you’d manipulated me into betraying her. The memory was too painful – so she put Electra out of sight. She’ll do something about her Monday.’

‘She’s rewriting history.’

‘I know that,’ he said in the light, warm tone of the woman he’d become. ‘Why didn’t I see Cherry for what she was months ago?’

‘Maybe she made you see things exclusively like a man,’ I said. ‘But Pierre, what’s she going to do on Monday?’

‘You think women see people clearly?’

‘We’re just as blind and stupid about love,’ I admitted. ‘But we usually smell a rat when another *woman*’s up to no good. What’s the frilly fascist going to do on Monday?’

‘Nothing – I told you. We hand the Ambo over to Zach and Sylvie. She keeps her end of the deal.’

‘You believe her? Meanwhile Electra’s forced to spend another freezing night in a shed. I don’t know if she has her coat on or even if she’s being fed. What did Little Missy say about that?’

‘Nothing. She’s too wobbly about her own future.’

‘Oh.’ Then, with sudden foreboding: ‘What exactly *is* the deal?’

‘See, I thought you’d be assholed.’ He bit his lip and then reluctantly removed the wig and restored it to its polystyrene support. ‘You always think shit’s all about you. But y’know it really ain’t. Other folk’s got their own shit too.’

‘You never even discussed Electra.’

‘That ain’t true. I wanted to. Cherry didn’t. What I found out came from

Li'l Missy. And that wasn't hardly nothing. Missy's my homie from way back. She's scared. She ain't even in control of her own meds. How d'you think she feels knowing crap like re-growth of facial hair depends on placating a woman she's afraid of? *Don't look like that.* You got no idea what fuckin' work she's put in, what a dangerous game she's into, to be who she *knows* she oughta be.'

'Who d'you think you're talking to?' I hissed. 'I was there. I saw her beaten up. I nursed her after a cop raped her. Don't you *dare...* '

'Okay, okay. Yeah, you saw bits and pieces. So you know. Ain't that worth the comfort of a dog?'

'This isn't about *comfort*. It's about using a living creature as a pawn in a game your ex "honee" wants to win. This is about a woman so avid for her own aims she gives a baby back to the people who used him for an ashtray. If she can do that to a baby, how can you trust what she'll do to a tranny she despises, or a dog who belongs to a woman she hates? Tell me that, Pierre. She used to say she loved you, right? And now, two days later, she's blackmailing you and threatening your friends. Isn't it time you stood up for what you *know's* right? Well, isn't it?'

He got up and went to the fridge. He took out two cans of lager and popped the ring pulls. 'Have a drink,' he said. 'You're going all Judy Garland.'



Did you think I chose the wine over the bolt cutter? If you did I can't blame you. That's what I was going to do. It's what I thought I wanted to do too. But I didn't. I bought the bolt cutter for ten stolen pounds. I stole a bag of clothes from a charity shop as well. I was trying so hard, you see, to find out what it felt like to be a *virtuous* thief. Then I went back to Billy's in a stone cold funk.

But Devil Mother was right. Without my Alcoholic Assistant I had no jazz. I couldn't bring myself to take the risk of being caught breaking and entering. Of violating the terms of my parole. Of being carted straight back to chokey. Even for Electra.

Call that love? No, I don't either.

Surely love is about putting someone else first? Or at least on an equal footing? It isn't about being too wussy-scared of chokey that you won't walk a few yards to next door's garden to try out your new bolt cutter on a cold troll's padlocked shed. That's not what Electra would do in my place. She'd put herself in danger to save me. On the other hand, I think Electra is the only one in the world who'd understand my failure to act. *That's* what I call love.

But on the *other* other hand, she ran away with her tail between her legs

when I was attacked by those kids at Castle Cropper. And did I blame her for that? Well, to be truthful, yes, I did. But only a little. I understood. Well, mostly. I wouldn't wish a kicking on her just because I was getting one. Is *that* love?

Love shouldn't depend on a couple of Billy's beers and another sleepless night.

Love, I thought feverishly, isn't just what you *feel* – it has to be backed up by what you *do*. Well, doesn't it?

Which is why I wrote a note on an envelope I found in Billy's trash bin. It said, 'If I'm not back by morning, call Kaylee Yost.' I slid it under the living room door where Pierre would have to see it on his way to the wet room.

24

What's Wrong With Us?

The shed loomed, rain-shiny, blacker than the sky.

'I'm coming,' I whispered to Electra. 'It won't be long now.' But she didn't answer. I fingered the padlock with one hand and juggled the bolt cutter with the other till I felt the jaws engage around the padlock keeper. Then, using both hands, I slammed the jaws shut.

A jarring pain ran like snakebite up my arm to my recently dislocated shoulder. 'Ow-ow-ow!' I cried. I couldn't help myself. I dropped the bolt cutter and ran behind the shed to hide.

No security light came on. No one opened a window and yelled at me. The pain subsided in a few minutes, but Electra remained silent.

I wished I could've found a torch in Billy's house. I wished I had riveter's wrists like Pierre. I wished I hadn't had to make an impossible choice between wine and bolt cutters. Beer doesn't dampen my inhibitions like wine does. Wine gives me confidence. Beer just makes me want to pee.

'Stop it,' Pierre said, making me jump out of my skin, let alone my pants. Where had he come from? 'What you doing?' he went on, disgusted. 'Marking territory? I thought Electra was supposed to be the dog.'

'It's that beer you gave me.' I scrambled to make myself decent. 'What're you doing?'

'Saving you from yourself. I got up to take a leak and found your note. I thought you'd be here doing some insane shit. Right again, yeah? Pissing in Cherry's garden? Some kinda payback?'

'You missed the bolt cutter,' I said. I was so relieved he'd come I could've hugged him. But I said, 'I didn't ask for your help. Why don't you go back to bed?' A person has a right to be surly when she's been caught peeing in her mortal enemy's herbaceous border.

‘Bolt cutter?’ he said. ‘Let me see.’

I showed him. ‘It doesn’t work,’ I said. ‘Maybe the padlock’s too new.’

‘Dummy,’ he said. ‘A: it’s a piece of crap. B: you’ll never cut through the padlock. Where did you go to school – Madame Doobie’s Academy for the brain damaged? You should try cutting the hasp – it’s a lot older and rustier.’

Silently I handed him the despised tool. He sighed and took it. After four tries the hasp fell away and the bolt cutter broke. He hauled the padlock off and pulled the shed door open.

Electra did not rush out to greet me. It was dark. At first I thought she wasn’t there – that maybe the Icicle had relented enough to give her a warmer bed for the night. But then I heard a tremulous whimper.

‘Hang on,’ Pierre said. ‘I got a little pocket torch.’ He fumbled in his pockets.

I felt my way into the shed until my hands met Electra’s soft fur. She seemed to be leaning, all wrong, against something hard. Then the weak bluish light from Pierre’s tiny torch showed me my best friend half slumped on her side on bare concrete. Her head was cocked up at a weird angle.

‘Shit, shit, oh shit,’ I said.

It wasn’t bad enough that Electra had been locked in a shed, or that she had no coat and no bed: someone had also chained her to a large petrol powered lawnmower with a chain too short to allow her to lie down properly. There wasn’t even a water bowl.

‘I don’t understand,’ Pierre said. ‘Who’d do shit like this?’

‘Your girlfriend,’ I said. ‘The woman you loved, the one you’re going on holiday with, the one you shared a bed with and called “honey”. Shut up talking. Help me get this chain off.’

‘Not my girlfriend.’ He knelt down beside me, pointing his tiny light at Electra’s neck. ‘What the...?’

The chain was padlocked around Electra’s neck and then padlocked to the lawnmower. Two padlocks for one poor old dog. ‘I can’t get this off,’ he said. ‘The bolt cutter broke.’

‘Can you stand up, darling?’ I asked Electra. I put my arms under her chest and helped her to her feet. She was so weak she had to sit down almost immediately. I didn’t even have any water to give her.

‘I’ll have to carry her,’ I said. ‘You’ll have to steal the lawnmower.’

‘Can’t we dismantle the machine?’

‘No tools,’ I said. ‘No time.’ I picked up Electra. He got behind the mower. Slowly, too slowly, we left the shed.

‘Shee-it,’ he said, looking at the kitchen window. The light was on. He checked his watch. ‘Breakfast,’ he said. ‘Your timing’s just crap.’

Electra's head drooped over my arm. She was almost invisible in the darkness of winter dawn, but I could feel through her fragile bones to the cruelty and sadness that had seeped into the centre of her body.

I thought, 'She'll never recover from this.' She'd put her trust in someone who was only pretending to care for her. She'd given faith and love to someone, Chilly Cherry, who was using her as a weapon in the war game she was playing with Pierre. She'd put her trust in me but I deserted her. I went to the lockup and left her with Li'l Missy, who was too weak and insecure to look after himself let alone protect her. She was my friend, my responsibility, and I failed her.

'My cute ass was not built for pushing lawnmowers,' Pierre grumbled. We were negotiating the gate from the garden to the gravel pull-in. I couldn't imagine why no one in the house had heard us.

Electra has always needed my protection. She was only a day away from the lethal injection when we met. She was a clapped-out old racing dog, unfamiliar with human company – not top of a wish list for anyone who wanted to adopt a cuddly pet. That's probably why the animal shelter people let a homeless woman take her. If she'd been younger, less scared and shivery they'd have found her a proper home.

'That worked out well, didn't it?' Mother Satan sneered. 'You? Look after a dog? You killed your hamster, as I recall.'

'Shut up,' I panted. Although she was starved and dehydrated, Electra was still a big dog. On top of that I had to stoop awkwardly because of the shortness of the chain that tied her to the lawnmower. But I could hear satanic laughter so I said, 'That hamster chewed through the wiring of an electric fire.'

'Because he was running away from your clammy little hands,' Mother crowed. 'He chose to fry rather than be petted by you. You overfed your goldfish. I warned you but you wouldn't listen. I'm so glad you left it too late to have children.'

'Don't cry,' Pierre said. 'There's no time. Hey, I got a toolbox in the car. We'll soon cut the poor old bitch free.'

'We couldn't protect Connor either,' I said. 'What's wrong with us?'

'It ain't what's wrong with *us*,' he said. 'It's what's wrong with... shee-it, I dunno... other folks. You can't say we didn't protect Connor. The cops'll sort something out for him.'

'The cops...' I began. Then we turned the corner. And there they were.

25

In Which Cashmere Triumphs Over Vagrancy

I told you – the cops always come back.

And there was Miss Iceland – her with her smooth beige-coloured hair and perfectly ironed beige clothing – so ladylike and plausible. Beside her, protecting her with a pink umbrella, was Li'l Missy – blonder but almost as respectable.

'Shee... ' began Pierre, stopping short.

'Oh fukkit, fukkit, fukkit,' I said, because in that single second, Miss Frozen-Face saw us. Up went her hand, and out came her sharp-clawed, perfectly manicured, pointy finger.

'Know what?' Pierre muttered. 'I shoulda known. Why? Cos she ain't got no ass at all – she goes straight down from her shoulders to her heels. Nothing to grab on to. Never trust a woman got no back.'

'Ha-ha-ha,' went Devil Mother.

'I *told* you,' Cherry said. 'They broke in to my property. That's my lawnmower they're stealing.' Her voice was genteel and persuasive. 'That's Angela Mary Sutherland. She's just been released from prison. And look – she's already committing a crime.'

I was staggering under Electra's dead weight. I sat down on the wet pavement, cradling her in my arms.

'We can't run away,' I told her and Pierre.

'I can,' Pierre said.

For a moment, I thought he would. But he stood his ground. He said, 'There's no crime. We don't want her damn mower. She can have it back soon as the dog's free. C'mon, Cherry, you don't wanna be doing like this – gimme the padlock keys.'

The two cops – one chunky man and one small woman – came over. They ambled in that purposeful way that makes the hair on my arms stand up. The woman said, ‘I’m PC Suzie Pang and this is PC Ian Gregory.’ They think, these days, that ambling and telling you their names make them less intimidating. Wrong – when you’ve had the kind of hassle with them I’ve had, they can’t disguise the fact that they’re the Devil’s strong arm here on earth.

‘You’ll know me wherever you see me,’ the Devil said. To my great relief, it seemed that he’d given up Mother’s voice and become male again.

‘You’re back,’ I said. I opened Billy’s huge coat so I could hold Electra close to my body. The coat was big enough for two of me and two of her. I loved Billy at that moment. I held her up against my chest so that she could rest her head on my shoulder without strangling herself on the chain. Her constant shivering terrified me.

‘Whose lawnmower is this?’ PC Gregory asked.

‘Hers,’ said Pierre.

‘Mine,’ said the Toxic Troll at the same time. ‘See? He isn’t bothering to deny it.’ She was so tasteful in her beige cashmere sweater, three-quarter length skirt and tan boots.

Pierre said, ‘Shee-it – what would I do with a lawnmower anyways? Ain’t got no damn lawn. But we gotta rescue this pooch.’

‘Whose dog is it?’ asked PC Pang.

‘Mine,’ I whispered.

‘Mine,’ Li’l Missy quavered at the same time. She was wearing a grey cashmere sweater, a houndstooth three-quarter length skirt and black boots.

‘It’s old and incontinent,’ Cherry said. ‘That’s why it sleeps in the shed.’

‘Why you doin’ this, girl?’ Pierre asked Missy. ‘And why you dressin’ up in Cherry’s clothes?’

Li’l Smister couldn’t meet Pierre’s eyes.

‘Which of you is the dog’s owner?’ Gregory asked.

Cherry nudged Smister and he said, ‘I am, of course,’ clearly and in a cultured accent with only a vestigial trace of Ireland in it.

I said, ‘She’s mine. I got her from the dog’s home in Battersea. She’s a retired racing dog.’

‘What’s her name?’ PC Pang asked.

‘Electra,’ Smister said.

‘Ask him what her full racing name is,’ I said.

Gregory and Pang looked at Smister. Cherry nudged him again and whispered something in his ear. I’m sure she was saying, ‘Make something up. They’ll never check.’ But he could only utter a garbled sound which began with, ‘I-I-I,’ and ended with, ‘R-r-remember.’

Iced Cherry looked disgusted. She said, 'This is beside the point.' She pointed again at me. 'She is on parole. She's an alcoholic and a vagrant, and she's just broken into my garden shed and stolen my lawnmower. I saw her from my bathroom window just before I dialled 999. If you don't believe me, go round to the back and look. I don't know why she's victimising me like this – I've only been trying to help her. But she's brought violence and mess into my home and I want you to do something about it.'

'Breaking and entering is a serious crime,' Gregory said to me. 'You are in possession of a lawnmower and a dog, neither of which belong to you.'

'Wait a minute,' Pang said. 'I think the dog is hers. She called it "she". Miss Price called it "it". But before we get into these details, I have to tell you, Miss Price, that we don't know anything about you calling 999. Our visit is not in response to that.'

'But you're here now,' Miss Frigid said. 'A crime's been committed and you can't ignore what's under your noses.'

'Well...' Pang began.

'Cruelty to animals is also a crime,' I said. 'You don't chain a dog to a lawnmower with a chain so short she can't lie down because she's incontinent. Which she isn't. You don't use two padlocks because you're protecting your oatmeal carpet. You do it out of cruelty and spite.'

'Less is more,' Pierre whispered, nudging my foot with his. 'Hush up.'

'Don't listen to him,' the Devil whispered. 'Keep talking. Express yourself.'

Gregory said, 'We haven't established who the legal owner is.'

'Does it matter?' I cried. 'Look at Electra. Go on, look. She's dying of cold and dehydration. *Stuff* the sodding legalities.'

'Oh brilliant,' Pierre said.

'Stuff the legalities?' sang the Devil. 'Cops just *love* hearing that.'

'She needs *water!*' I shouted. 'I don't know how long she's been kept without it.'

Pang said, 'We're here because serious allegations have been levelled at the occupants of this address. These include abduction and assault on a minor...' she flipped her notebook open, '... a child called Connor Cropper.' She turned directly to Cherry. 'What can you tell me about that?'

'I don't *believe* this. I call you out with a legitimate complaint about breaking and entering and theft – which you can see with your own eyes has actually happened. Last night I called you out about assault and trespass in my own home.' She gestured to the freshly painted front door behind her. 'What do you lot do? Absolutely nothing. You take more notice of drunk old souses...' Here she gestured to me as the representative of drunk old souses everywhere, '... than you do of a respectable home owner who pays her

council tax – your wages. If you want to know who kidnapped Connor Cropper... ’ again the pointy finger, ‘... she did. She incited that pervert... ’ The moving finger swung like a weather-vane towards Pierre, ‘... into criminal activity too. And then she brought dossers like herself – foreign terrorists – into my home. And they assaulted me and won’t leave.’

‘Hey... ’ Pierre said.

‘Who’s been a naughty girl?’ PC Gregory said, clearly believing cashmere over vagrancy.

‘Get out of that,’ sniggered He who delights in downfalls.

Then two things happened one on top of the other: Tantie ran out of Billy’s front door with a jug of water in one hand and a cereal bowl in the other, and another police car pulled up outside Cherry’s house.

‘*Pauvre petite,*’ Tantie said, hunkering down beside me and pouring water from the jug into the bowl. She was wearing two pairs of Billy’s giant socks on her feet, but north of that she was sensibly clad in black wool.

‘What we got here?’ asked the new cop as he eased his bulk out of the small car, ‘a church meeting? It is Sunday, after all.’

‘*Merci, mille fois,*’ I said to Tantie. ‘You’re an angel, and I love you.’

Gregory said, ‘Hello, Nidge – bit of a nause here.’ He looked as if he needed all the masculine backup he could get.

I supported Electra’s weight as best I could while Tantie held the bowl under her nose.

Pang said, ‘Are you here about a lawnmower? Because I’m beginning to think we might be in the middle of a pretty septic domestic.’

Slowly, weakly, Electra started to lap at the water. Tears ran down my face.

‘Fill me in, why don’t you,’ Nidge said.

‘If you’ll just listen to me... ’ Miss Sepsis began.

‘Just a minute, Miss Price... ’

‘Please, Smister, *please* bring us the padlock keys... ’

‘Yeah, Li’l Missy, bring ’em. We can’t be... ’

‘Stay right where you are,’ snapped the Dairy Queen. And then more gently, ‘Don’t go wandering off, dear – its almost time for your pills.’ Li’l Missy flinched.

The three cops went into a huddle. I heard Gregory open with, ‘The way I see it... ’ only to be cut off a few moments later by Pang saying, ‘That’s too simple... ’ followed by Nidge’s plaintive, ‘I like simple.’

Pierre stared at Cherry with a kind of awe. ‘Are you *threatening* Li’l Missy?’

‘I can’t believe you’ve even suggested that,’ the Lemon Drop said in a sad, hurt tone of voice. ‘What’s happened to you? Are you letting an unstable

alcoholic influence the way you think about me? She's never liked me, and she's been trying to come between us from the moment those idiots released her from prison. And you *let* her. If you had any integrity at all, you'd have stayed loyal to your friends. Whatever I've done I've done with love. Don't you see that? It's breaking my heart to watch her drag you down to a place where you've lost all self-respect.'

Satan said, 'I couldn't have written a better script myself. That's brilliant.' He clapped his hands. 'Brava, my child, brava!'

'It wasn't her destroyed my wigs,' Pierre said. But he sounded confused and defensive.

I said, 'Cherry, please, if you have an ounce of humanity in you, let me have the padlock keys.'

'She was dragging you back into an unhealthy way of life,' she went on, totally ignoring me. Her voice was calm, soft and entirely reasonable. 'You didn't need those costumes any more, sweetie, you've come such a long way. But now you're allowing a mad woman to become dependent on you. If you aren't careful you might find yourself having to look after her for the rest of your life. But if that's your choice, I can only wish you luck.'

It was thorn-sharp spite, but she said it in such a quiet rational tone of voice that Pierre began to shift his position from beside Electra and me towards Cherry. The Master of Malice said, 'You've got to admit I've taught her well. I couldn't have done better myself.'

Electra stopped lapping and slumped in my arms, frightening the life out of me. But with my arms around her, I could still feel her ribcage move. I lay down flat beside the lawnmower with her on top of me. It wasn't just that I was flattened by Polar Price's malice. It wasn't just that my heart was aching. My back was aching too, and I needed to find a position where Electra could lie naturally, unstrangled, with her head on my chest. She was the important one, I told myself. I had to be restrained for her sake – I couldn't get up and wallop a troll without hurting her more.

'Is she sleeping?' I asked Tantie.

'Yes, but you are wet, so wet.'

'Tantie, can you get some of the meat from that cottage pie in Billy's fridge?'

She didn't have time to answer because an angry voice floated down from the house next door. It said, 'Fuck off – you ain't giving none of my pie to a dog. No way!' Billy had entered the field of battle.

26

Accusations

From my supine position it was hard to see what was going on. I lifted my head. Billy, wearing his tartan pyjamas and navy bathrobe was at his window pointing his mobile phone at the battleground below. I yelled up at him, 'She's starving, Billy – I'll replace whatever she eats.'

'In your dreams,' he yelled back. 'What'll I have for my Sunday lunch if she eats my pie? No. I forbid it.'

'Oh I see,' Madame Frosty said. 'You're all staying with Big Belly. I should've known.'

'Pierre isn't,' Li'l Missy Smister said. 'He's sleeping in the Ambo.' And that's how I found out that, true to his word, Pierre hadn't told even his long-time homie that we were next door. My throat couldn't have felt more choked up if I'd swallowed a hard-boiled egg whole. I laid my head back down on the wet pavement and let the slow rain wash my face. Under the coat I could feel Electra's shallow breath tickle my neck. Almost more than sleep, I wanted the taste of red wine in my mouth. I was hollow and weak without it. But I hugged Electra closer and made sure her head was protected.

'The freezer,' Tantie called up to Billy. 'Per'aps *les saussisons* are there?'

'What?' Billy yelled. 'I don't understand. What's in my freezer?'

'Such an ignorant man,' Miss Know-it-all murmured to Smister and Pierre.

'Perhaps there are sausages in the freezer,' I said to Tantie.

'Sausages,' Tantie yelled.

'On your bike,' Billy yelled back.

'Bike?' Tantie asked.

A new voice piped up, 'Mummy, can we give the poor doggy some of Scruffy's food?'

I turned my head and saw that the woman who'd been camcording

Cherry's fracas with Mrs Cropper and the cops a night ago was standing on the other side of the road camcording me.

'Okay,' she said, without taking her eye from the viewfinder. 'But only a little and make sure you get the bowl back.'

'Thank you,' I said. Her son ran into his house.

'This is becoming a circus,' Cherry said. 'Can't we go indoors, Officer Gregory? All this disagreement in public – it's not how I run my life.'

'Let's get out of this endless rain,' Gregory said to Suzie Pang.

'You lot stay here,' Nidge said to everyone who was not a cop or wearing cashmere.

I began to panic. This was all wrong. Cherry would deal with Mrs Cropper's accusations about Connor in private, compartmentalised, as if it had nothing to do with Electra and a lawnmower. She'd explain the issue neatly and plausibly, putting the blame on me and Pierre. There would be no one to contradict her. Little Missy Smister certainly wouldn't.

The lawnmower, Electra and I would be in a separate compartment. A simple, obvious case of theft, all boxed away clean and tidy, Cherry-style. Cos that's how she liked to run her life. I'd be torn away from Electra and banged up, a guest of Her Majesty again. This time my best friend would certainly die. No one would charge Cherry with crimes against dogs, babies, drag artistes, transsexuals and drunks. Miss Perfectly Plausible wins again.

'You've been falling down this hole all your life,' the Devil chortled. 'You're weak – too weak to fight your mother, too weak to go out and find a decent man, too weak to stay honest, too piss-piddling weak to protect...'

'*Shut up!*' I shouted. 'Get off my back. Why are you persecuting me like this?'

'Don't mind her,' Frozen Cherry said sweetly. 'She's the "mad woman in the attic". She thinks she's talking to Satan. I'm really, truly sorry for her, but they should never have given her an early release. I tried to help, but she's refused to take her medication. What can you do?'

My eyes were closed so I couldn't see her pretty, helpless shrug. But I did hear PC Gregory say, 'I'm sure you did your best.'

'Stop,' I cried. 'Everything she says is twisted and tainted.'

'Sh-sh,' Tantie said, and started to stroke my frizzy wet hair.

'It's true I talk to the Devil,' I went on. 'But she only knows that because she's his daughter, a blood relative of incarnate evil.'

'See what I mean?' The woman managed to sound smug and horribly sympathetic at the same time.

'Wait!' Pierre spoke up at last. 'Okay, so she dances with Mr D sometimes. But that don't mean she's bad or a liar.'

‘It doesn’t mean she isn’t,’ his ex-girlfriend said sweetly.

‘Your champion is an abomination who wears women’s raiment,’ the Devil told me cheerfully.

‘Don’t you talk to me about abominations,’ I said. ‘Your daughter isn’t just bad and a liar, she’s also a kiddie killer.’

‘What?’ said PC Pang.

‘Oh come *on!*’ Cherry exclaimed. ‘Are you really going to listen to the ravings of a mad woman?’

‘Let’s just get out of the rain,’ PC Gregory put in.

I nuzzled Electra’s slender head for luck. I had one chance to explain that Cherry, by sending Connor off with his appalling grandmother, had probably sentenced him to death. I felt dizzy. If I hadn’t already been flat out on the pavement I think I’d have fallen over. Just half a glass of wine would’ve solved everything. But all that arrived was a small bowl of dogfood in the hands of a ginger-haired angel.

‘You’re an angel,’ I told him, forgetting Connor and struggling to sit up.

‘I’m Ziggy,’ he said. ‘My mum says I’m a Starman.’

‘Your mum’s right, you’re a real star.’ To some the choice between Electra and Connor might’ve been difficult. Not to me. ‘Hold the bowl steady,’ I said. ‘Yes, just like that. Oh look, she’s beginning to eat.’

How can I tell you what the smell of dogfood meant to me? Or the sound of Electra noshing it up? A small victory I know, but from the very beginning my life was a series of defeats. Everything big – love, self-respect, honesty, good faith, sanity, had been stripped away. All that remained was dogfood.

‘What do you mean, “stripped away”?’ sneered Satan. ‘You never had them in the first place. They coined the term “born loser” just for you.’

‘But Electra’s alive,’ I said. ‘She’s strong enough to eat and drink. What does it matter if your frozen-faced daughter’s killing Connor Cropper? My defeats may be huge. But you can’t steal my tiny triumphs.’ I was sitting up now, leaning back against the lawnmower. Ziggy was holding the food bowl, Tantie the water bowl. Pierre was watching Cherry, Li’l Missy and the two cops walk back down the path to her front door. He called out, ‘Li’l Missy – wait up. You can still make this right.’

‘I can’t,’ Li’l Missy said. ‘I’m not strong like you.’ He couldn’t even turn round and look Pierre in the eye. I could tell from his voice he was crying.

In that moment, quick as two sparks, I saw Zach and Sylvie appear in the doorway. As Cherry approached they slammed the door in her face.

‘*Allez Débris d’Or!*’ Tantie dropped the water bowl and punched the air with her pale, skinny fist.

‘Oy, that’s my cereal bowl you just smashed,’ Billy yelled, outraged. ‘You’ll

have to pay for that.'

'This is ridiculous,' Cherry snapped. 'Do something.'

'Police – open up!' PC Gregory knocked and leaned on the doorbell simultaneously.

'Nidge,' Pang said, 'run round the back.'

While Nidge went lumbering round the corner she went on, 'Just for the record – can we get one tiny fact straight? Who is the legal owner of the dog?'

'I am,' Smister and I said together.

'She is,' Pierre said, jerking his thumb in my direction.

'You have no integrity whatsoever,' Cherry said. 'Tell the truth and admit that for nearly a year, you, Li'l Missy and that dog have been living in my house, eating my food. Li'l Missy brought the dog to *me*. *We've* been looking after it... *her*. *I've* been paying for heat, light and carpet cleaning. You've been sleeping in my bed, Pierre – doesn't that earn me a tiny piece of your loyalty or respect?'

'Is this true?' Pang asked Pierre.

'Kinda,' he mumbled. 'Well, it's accurate but it surely ain't honest. The dog, Electra, doesn't belong to either her or Li'l Missy. She belongs to the cracked one over there who's trying to save her life.'

'And you...' PC Pang turned to me, '... what're you talking about – killing babies? Does this have anything to do with the abduction and abuse of Connor Cropper? What *has* been going on here in the last couple of days?'

'For god's sake,' Cherry interrupted.

'The last couple of days?' bellowed Billy from his window. 'You're all talking about the wrong baby. That Witch-Bitch, Cherry Price, killed her husband's little son. He disappeared right about the time she built that bleedin' eyesore of a shed in her back garden. Which she never got planning permission for. Me and some of the neighbours been complaining about it ever since. But does anyone do *anything* round here? You should pull that effing shed down and see what she got buried underneath.'

More Accusations

Everyone started talking at once.

‘And who are you?’ began Suzie Pang.

‘You can’t be serious – he’s a total slob.’ Cherry was beginning to raise her voice.

‘Oh bloody brilliant!’ The neighbour turned her camcorder up towards Billy.

‘Go Billy,’ I said softly into Electra’s ear. And Tantie imitated me at the top of her voice, ‘*Go Billy!*’

‘*Go Billy,*’ shouted Ziggy, enjoying himself enormously. ‘Look, Mummy, the doggy ate all her breakfast.’

‘Go indoors, Ziggy,’ the neighbour said without for a moment taking her eye from the viewfinder. ‘You’re getting wet.’

‘The back door’s locked,’ panted Nidge coming round the side of the house holding his chest. ‘But that shed’s definitely been tampered with.’

‘We can’t deal with this here,’ Gregory hissed at Suzie Pang. ‘We got to get this lot down to the station.’

‘Oh, you must be joking,’ Cherry said, as close to losing control as I’d ever seen her.

I went rigid with alarm. Even Electra woke up momentarily and whined once before settling herself more comfortably on top of me.

‘Yeah,’ shouted Billy, ‘come and get me. I’ll enjoy that. I ain’t been outdoors for over three and a half years.’

I said, ‘Unless you can persuade Miss Icy-pants over there to part with the padlock keys you’ll have to take Electra and the lawnmower too. I can’t leave her strangling out in the rain. And you can’t make me. If she dies it’ll be on all of your heads. But especially yours, Freezer-face. You’re a baby-killer already.’

Don't add to your list of atrocities.'

'Stop calling me cold!'

'Shut up, all of you!' howled PC Gregory.

'I'm not cold, am I, Pierre?' Iced Cherry asked, in her sickening Tweetie Pie voice.

'You just been called a baby-killer,' Pierre said. 'You're quarrelling with "cold"?''

'But you *know* me.'

'I thought I did, but last few days, I seen another side to you. You talk "integrity" and "honesty" and "values". But, you always gotta win, Cherry. With you it's *all* about the win – control, what you're forcing *other* folks to do. Baby, you ain't got any "values" except if pushing people around's a "value".'

'What're you talking about?' Cherry wailed. 'I've had my home stolen from me by foreign terrorists, and all you lot can talk about is a mangy, incontinent dog and a savage incontinent child. I don't know anything about padlock keys. Ask *him*.' And here she pointed the vicious finger at Li'l Missy who turned pale. 'And,' she continued, '*I can't get into my own house*. What're you going to do about *that*?''

'How does it feel?' I asked.

'*Oui*,' Tantie said. 'Ow does it feel?'

'Do you have the padlock keys?' Gregory gave Li'l Missy an approving glance. Obviously blonde hair, boobs and boots beat out the personal pronoun, 'him'.

'No,' Missy said, throwing an imploring glance at Cherry Gelato, who ignored him. 'They must be inside – I don't know where. I don't know what to do.' He transferred the helpless imploring gaze to Pierre. '*I really* don't know what to do. It was time for my pills an hour ago. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, *I'm sorry*. I couldn't help it.'

'It's okay,' Pierre said, because he was way more forgiving than me.

But Electra's fate depended on me so I said to Tantie, 'Can you ask Zach and Sylvie to look for the keys... *les clefs*... and find Li'l Missy's medication?'

'*Zach et Sylvie? Pahl!*' Her hand gesture, the flick of her wrist, were so dismissive I concluded that although she supported the ideals of *Débris d'Or*, her nephew and niece might as well be dead.

So many offences, so many old injuries, were surfacing in the rain in Cherry's front garden. So much hurt, so much need for forgiveness. But not from me, I thought – I'm not forgiving anyone till Electra's safe. And even then, I'm not promising anything.

After a brief conference with her two colleagues Pang approached Tantie and me. 'Does she speak English?' she asked me.

‘Do you speak English?’ I asked Tantie. Tantie began to laugh.

‘I’m sorry,’ Pang said, addressing Tantie directly while giving me a reproachful glare. ‘Look, we have a very complicated situation here, and I don’t want to make it even messier by arresting foreign nationals...’ She paused. Tantie stared back at her, managing to look both dignified and ludicrous in two pairs of sodden socks. Pang began again, ‘If you could help us simplify a complex situation, we’d be grateful.’

Tantie considered this. I held my breath. The persistent rain was beginning to seep through Billy’s coat. I could not afford to go to a cop shop even for a moment. Once there, they’d never let me leave. They have the cyber-me trapped, wrapped like a fly in a spider’s web, in their computers. My only safety is invisibility.

‘Good luck with that one,’ the Devil said. ‘Because, you know, you *have* broken parole. You’ve committed at least half a dozen crimes that I know of. And my beautiful daughter, Cherry Honee, will definitely remind the police of all of them. Such a good daughter,’ he purred, threat and satisfaction oozing from his voice in equal measure.

‘I can’t think,’ I said. ‘Stop talking. I need a drink.’

‘Mummy, can I give the lady some water?’ Ziggy said.

‘The *lady* isn’t talking about water.’ Ziggy’s mum pointed her camcorder at me.

Nothing but straightforward fact would do for Ziggy’s mum – no evasion. Take it from a beggar – sometimes when you really, *really* want help, you’ve got to bite the bullet and ask for it. I looked directly into her lens. ‘You’re right. I’m an alcoholic. I’m suffering from withdrawal sickness at this very moment. I’m not asking for a bottle. I can’t afford to get baked in this situation. But if you have a glass of *anything* you could let me have – preferably red wine – I’d be able to cope better. And I’d be truly grateful.’

‘I told you so,’ Cherry screeched. ‘She’s admitted it – she’s a scraggy old alky and you can’t believe a word she says.’

The lens didn’t waver. Ziggy’s mum said, ‘Ziggy, listen very carefully – in the fridge door there’s a bottle of that grown-up juice I won’t let you touch. Go and get it. And put on your hoody or you’ll catch cold. Hurry.’

Ziggy ran. My heart raced. I couldn’t tell if the moisture on my face was sweat, tears or rain.

Tantie said, ‘Come with me,’ and grabbing Pang by the wrist she led her towards Cherry’s front door. Tantie was trying to help me. Somehow, resentful and unwilling as I was, I’d made a friend.

‘Oy, where do you think you’re going?’ Gregory said suddenly. Pierre, in a doomed attempt to be inconspicuous, was trying to peel away from the crowd.

He said, 'I got tools in the back of my car. I kinda thought maybe it'd save time if I could cut the poor old dog loose.'

'Tools? Like bolt cutters?' Special Constable Nidge was sharp as his own thumb. 'I'm going to need to see these tools.'

'Shee-it,' Pierre said, resignedly. 'I'll pick 'em up now, right?'

'You ain't going nowhere till we say so.'

Ziggy appeared in my line of sight holding... Oh bless you, Ziggy and Ziggy's mum, may you both be rich and secure all your lives, may you never be thwarted by enemies or betrayed by friends.

Ziggy held, in his grubby little hands, a bottle of Shiraz at least a third full.

'Take it slow,' a new voice advised. The speaker was behind Ziggy's mum and off to the side. He was in a group of about seven other neighbours with mobile phones and umbrellas. One oldish couple had brought out picnic chairs and mugs of coffee.

I held out my hand and Ziggy placed in it the smooth, cool glass container of salvation. I couldn't speak until I'd poured a life-saving mouthful down my throat. Then I said, 'Thank you both so much.'

'Do you know what you've done?' Miss Self-Righteous said. 'You've given alcohol to a dangerous alcoholic.'

'Well you've given her pneumonia,' Ziggy's mum shot back. 'And you've probably killed her dog, just like you killed Steve Pascoe's kid – if what Billy says is right.'

'It's right,' Billy shouted down from his window.

Electra stirred in my arms. 'Am I dead?' she whispered faintly.

'It's okay,' I whispered back. 'It's going to be okay.' I tipped the bottle again, letting the wine fill my mouth, trying to swallow slowly, trying to allow the magic potion to drip into my gullet when what I wanted was to gulp, to feel that sweet release all in one go.

'Who's Steve Pascoe?' PC Gregory said.

'Her ex,' Ziggy's mum said, pointing at Cherry with the camcorder.

'She broke up his marriage,' Billy shouted.

'Lies, lies, lies,' Cherry said. 'I don't know why you're doing this – rewriting history.'

'His kid just disappeared,' Billy yelled with unseemly relish. 'That shed's way too big for one bleeding lawnmower. You gotta find out what's buried underneath.'

'Told you so,' said Ziggy's mum. And a soft chorus of 'Yeah' and 'People been saying that for ages,' came from the crowd behind her. Cherry, it seemed, had pissed off a lot of neighbours.

She said, 'I'm calling my solicitor, right now.' She turned to Li'l Missy,

snapping her fingers. Silently he handed her a phone. 'When this stupidity is cleared up, I'm going to sue you, you, you and you for slander and defamation of character.' She pointed at Billy, Ziggy's mum, the crowd behind her, and me. Well, she wouldn't leave me out, would she? She hadn't made nearly enough trouble for me already.

'These are serious accusations,' Gregory called up to Billy, 'and unless you can back them up I'd advise you to pipe down.'

'Arrest me.' Billy was wheezing and shaking with laughter. Finally his unmanageable flesh had rendered him invulnerable to something. Maybe that's what it was for from the very beginning: armour to protect a very small, very frightened creature.

'He's a bitter old blob.' Cherry seemed to find her balance when slagging off others. 'His wife left him,' she added to PC Gregory, but loud enough to be heard by everyone, especially Billy. 'He resents anyone younger and more attractive than himself.' She touched her already immaculate helmet of hair, sucking strength from the knowledge that there were people older and fatter than herself. Then she turned away dismissively and busied herself with her phone.

Every step she took was shadowed by Li'l Missy and her pink umbrella. I wondered if I was the only one to think this looked mad and egocentric.

'Of *course* you're the only one,' the Devil told me gleefully. 'You aren't normal, so you don't have normal opinions. But as you, yourself, are quite mad, it follows that you'd accuse my darling girl of madness. But I have to remind you – *she* isn't the one who has been Sectioned and treated with anti-psychotic medications. Think about that before you criticise someone for having your own weaknesses.'

'Don't answer,' Electra whispered. 'Don't stoop to his level.'

A murmur ran through the crowd. I turned to look and saw that far from helping to relieve a complex situation, Zach and Sylvie had hung a pale pink sheet out of the bedroom window and started to sing the 'Internationale' in French. The Magic Marker message on the sheet read, 'Stop capitalism. Stop war. Stop death to penguins.'

'Well, I can't disagree about the penguins,' said the elderly lady in the picnic chair.

'*C'est l'éruption de la fin...*' sang Zach and Sylvie in sweet harmony, left fists clenched, right hands waving the sheet. In spite of this they were as ethereal as film stars in the wrong movie.

'That's my sheet,' Cherry wailed. 'They've ruined a perfectly good sheet. I keep telling you, they're vandalising my property. And no one's doing a thing to stop them.'

‘I really do sympathise,’ Gregory said. ‘Unfortunately it’s not a police matter.’

‘Well it *should* be a police matter,’ called out the woman who liked penguins. ‘Or we’re none of us safe in our own homes.’

‘This is democracy at work,’ sniggered the Devil. ‘The voice of the people, witnessed and recorded by the people. Like it?’

‘It beats the shit out of fascism,’ I said.

‘What are you babbling about?’ Cherry stood over me, hands on hips, protected from the rain by Li’l Missy’s pink umbrella. ‘This is all your fault. I told the boys never to bring you to my house. You’re dirty, alcoholic and mad. You’ve got more facial hair than you’ve got morals. You don’t fit in. You can’t control yourself. You spread chaos wherever you go. And you...’ she turned on Pierre. ‘We’ve been as intimate as two people can be. But you let this... this... dirty vagrant into my life. All I wanted was someone to love, but as soon as *she* turns up you go back to your old deviant ways, wearing women’s clothes, making me look like a fool. You could’ve evicted the terrorists, but no, suddenly you’re all, “this isn’t what I’m about”. Well, let me tell you, a proper boyfriend would’ve protected me. A proper *man* would’ve done something, anything, to show whose side he was on...’

‘Stop,’ Pierre said. ‘Maybe I’m not a proper man. Maybe that’s something to be proud of. Second, you didn’t want someone to love – you wanted someone to control. Fucking a guy does not give you the right to change him, to work relentlessly to screw with what’s important to him. You knew what I was from the beginning. I didn’t hide it. I’m a drag artist. I told you straight. Face it, honey, you pretended to accept me but right from the git-go you were planning to destroy everything about me that didn’t fit your picture of a “real boyfriend”. All you wanted was someone to pay your mortgage, service your car, and show off to your family. That ain’t love.’

‘Show you off? They were so impressed with you they joined the British National Party two days after meeting you.’

‘That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said all morning,’ Billy called.

‘I don’t need *your* approval,’ Cherry snapped. ‘Why don’t you mind your own business and use that fat mouth to gobble up another dozen doughnuts.’

Entertaining though this was it distracted my attention away from a furious argument that was going on between Tantie, Zach and Sylvie. I didn’t understand a word of it but nobody seemed to be expressing much love or family feeling.

Pang was just as flummoxed. She came back to Gregory, saying, ‘Should we call for an interpreter?’

‘We should call for the paddy wagon and more bods to help load these

lunatics up and dump 'em all in the Thames. Or the armed response unit. Or a bunch of burly nurses with needles full of sleepy juice.'

'Please!' Pang pointed behind Gregory to where the neighbours were recording every word. The Devil was right: this was democracy in action.

'Well, we gotta do something. Call for backup.'

'I did.'

'Where are they?'

'There's a pile-up at Brent Cross – an all-units shout.'

'All units except us.' Gregory shrugged meaty shoulders, sending raindrops flying from his raincoat. He stared around him with undisguised dislike. 'We get the freak show.'

'Okay now,' Pang began, not quite decisively. 'Ms Price, as the most serious of our enquiries involves you, I'm asking you to come down to the station with us.'

'No,' Cherry said, absolutely decisive. 'I'm not leaving my home in the hands of violent, destructive terrorists. And I refuse to go anywhere without legal representation.'

'You'd be much more comfortable,' Gregory said in a placatory tone of voice that made Pang wince. 'At least sit in the car with us and answer a few simple questions.'

'Why should I answer any questions – ridiculous questions that come from lies and rumours started by drunks and malicious neighbours? I asked the police to come and help *me*. Crimes have been committed against *me* – theft and violence. But will you do anything about that? No. After repeated requests you still refuse to help. You take the word of alkie and deviants but you ignore me. Give me one reason why I should help you?'

I had to admit that Wintry Cherry had a great line in rhetoric. This was another good but dishonest speech. I thought the applause I heard came from the Devil, but then I realised that a few of the neighbours standing behind Ziggy's mum were clapping too.

'Hey!' Billy waved from his bedroom window. 'Are you telling us the big nig-nog wears women's clothes? This gets better and better.'

'Wig up and take a bow,' I suggested to Pierre. But he was way ahead of me. He walked over to Billy's front yard and called up, 'That's a great sofa you've got in your living room. The ice cream was fantastic too. I wanna thank you for your generous hospitality.' He dropped into the most graceful curtsy I'd ever seen if you don't count ballerinas.

But graceful or not, the idiot had certainly cost me my bed for the night. I could see Billy puffing and sputtering, trying to express a harsh enough response, but PC Pang said to Cherry, 'I really must insist, and if you won't

come voluntarily I'll have to arrest you.'

'Wa-hey!' Billy yelled, completely diverted. 'Result! Wrong child, but I'll take it!'

'What're you going to arrest me for?' Cherry asked in a tone of sorrowful outrage. 'You mentioned an abduction, I think. Well, I didn't abduct anyone. He did!' She pointed triumphantly to Pierre. 'And she did!' She pointed at me. 'And...'

'*Don't!*' shouted Pierre. 'Just *don't*. You can't be that cruel.'

'This isn't about cruelty,' Cherry said sweetly. 'It's about truth.'

'What is?' Pang asked.

'Him.' Madame I C Ice calmly turned to Li'l Missy and removed the umbrella from his tremulous grasp. 'This *man* is the third nun who abducted the feral child from his home in... um... where was it?'

'*Man?*' said Gregory, Billy, Ziggy's Mum and half the neighbours.

'Excuse me?' said Pang.

'Cherry... ' Tears ran down Li'l Missy's pretty face. 'Why? I thought we were friends.'

'I'm sorry if you feel hurt,' Cherry said, with no sympathy whatsoever. 'But this isn't about you. It's about the principle of telling the truth. Truth is what we all need in life and I'm sure you'll be strengthened by it in the end.'

I said, 'Well, the truth is that you are a stony-hearted, manipulative, icy, spiteful, predatory... '

'Please don't say "bitch",' Electra whispered, safe, for the moment, in my arms.

28

In Which Li'l Missy Changes Sides

There was an advantage to lying flat on my back on a wet pavement – I was out of Suzie Pang's sightline.

There was a disadvantage to being big and black. Pang turned on Pierre. 'You abducted a child? Are you aware... ?'

'No,' Pierre said simply.

And then Li'l Missy Smister stepped up. Her pretty cheeks were still wet with tears. She went to Pierre's side and said, 'Officer Pang, please listen – at the time, we weren't abducting anyone. We were rescuing an abused child. Pierre, show her the picture. All we were going to do was take pictures through the letterbox. But when we saw... It was so awful, Officer Pang, I've never seen anything like it. We had to do something. Show her the photo, Pierre. All we were going to do was send photos to the Social Services, I swear. But we were right there, on the spot, and we couldn't just leave it to someone else, could we, Pierre? We couldn't wait for someone else to make a decision.'

'That's enough,' said Gregory. 'All three of you, into my car. Right now.'

'No,' I said, anxiety making me finish the Shiraz far too quickly. 'I'm not leaving Electra like this.'

'Take them away,' said Judasina Price. 'I told you – this has nothing to do with me. I did nothing wrong. *They* did.'

'No,' said Li'l Missy Smister. Once started, there was no stopping her. She walked, with her sassy high-bummed flounce, over to Cherry's front door where Tantie was still arguing with Zach and Sylvie. Everyone – men, women and Ziggy – wanted to watch her, but no one knew what she was going to do.

What she did was fast and simple. She picked up the boot-scraper from Cherry's door step. Two strides took her to the living room window. Her right arm went back, and, with the crisp crinkle of smashing glass, the boot-scraper

sailed straight through the window.

‘Throws like a girl,’ Pierre said. ‘So she must be a girl.’

‘*My window!*’ shrieked the Queen of Mean. ‘Someone! Do something.’

A ragged cheer went round the audience.

Zach and Sylvie stared down, horrified.

Tantie started to pick glass shards out of the frame with delicate thin fingers.

A neighbour loaned Pierre her walking stick and he joined Tantie, knocking glass away, making it safe enough for him to step over the window sill into Cherry’s living room.

Cherry focussed on Ian Gregory as her most responsive target. ‘Please,’ she said, hiding her fury behind helpless appeal. ‘Please, your colleagues seem to have lost control of the situation. And they’ve lost sight of who’s the victim here. Isn’t there something *you* can do?’ She leaned towards him, subtly, as if she wanted to lay her head against his manly chest and say, ‘Make it all right, Daddy, make it all go away.’

I’d seen her unleash exactly the same body language on Pierre. It made me sick

It made PC Ian Gregory puffed up and protective. ‘Don’t you worry,’ he said, activating his radio. ‘I’ll sort all this out in a jiffy.’

I thought the tumour of terror and rage in my chest would rupture and the force of the explosion would break my ribs.

Ignored, Suzie Pang said, ‘*Stop!* Everyone stop what you’re doing right now.’ She looked as if she wanted to sit down and cry. If she hadn’t been wearing the uniform I’d have felt sorry for her.

Billy yelled, ‘The pretty girl’s a gay bloke? That’s disgusting.’

‘And you fancied him,’ one of the neighbours yelled back. ‘Don’t think we ain’t seen you spying on everyone from behind your curtains, you dirty old perv.’

‘Shut your hole, Jew boy,’ Billy thundered.

Oh he really had a way with words. He was my host; I was his parasite. And last night I nearly killed him. Not even a close encounter with death made him any kinder or more understanding. Sorrow curled up like a kitten next to rage and fear.

‘Put him straight,’ the Devil suggested slyly. ‘Give him the benefit of your wisdom on the subject of gender re-assignment.’

‘Hush,’ murmured Electra. ‘Your understanding of that subject is only matched by your understanding of particle physics.’

‘I’m going in,’ Pierre said.

‘Don’t you dare,’ Cherry said. ‘Stop him, Officer Gregory, please.’

Ignoring both of them, Pierre stepped over the window ledge into Cherry's front room, appearing a minute later at the front door. He opened it wide, and said, 'Party time. Come on in everyone, make yourselves to home. Dry off, warm up.'

Tantie was first off the mark. She raced in and up the stairs. Li'l Missy followed, hesitating on the threshold until Pierre opened his arms and offered reconciliation and a huge, muscular hug.

'No, no, no,' said the owner of the Ice House. 'I didn't invite you. You're not wanted. It's my house.'

'Well, I'm still paying the goddam mortgage,' Pierre countered, standing back politely to allow in three police officers, Ziggy's mum and Ziggy.

'Can you walk, darling?' I asked.

'I'll try,' Electra said softly.

I got up stiffly and with effort. Billy's coat was heavy with rain. I set Electra on her feet, noticing where the chain had rubbed a raw patch on her neck. Her skin is very thin. Greyhounds get hurt so easily. Little Missy Smister and I gave her soft scarves to wear round her neck instead of a collar. Ice Price made her wear chains. She'll have to pay for that, I thought grimly.

I pushed the lawnmower. Electra limped unsteadily beside it.

'No, not you,' Cherry yelled, trying to push Pierre out of the way so she could shut us out. Pierre stood so solid she almost bounced off him.

'Are you mad?' she shouted at him. 'I'm not having a lawnmower on my hall carpet. And I told you, that dirty old lush is barred.'

'You don't want the lawnmower inside the house?' he asked innocently. 'Simple. Fetch the padlock keys. But this is my party. My guest list. For once you don't get to call the shots.'

Floating down from next door came Billy's voice, 'That's my fucking coat, you cow. You let that pervert into my home, you broke my breakfast bowl and you want to feed my lunch to the dog. Don't you ever set foot in my house again.'

Barred from two houses in one morning? That was too much, even for me. 'Billy,' I yelled back, 'I'm sorry about the bowl. But you'd better let me back in if you want any more beer.'

'And tell that old Froggy piece to come over and give me my pie,' he shouted. 'You can't leave me all alone and hungry.'

'If you want anything at all,' I said, 'you'd better stop calling people bad names.' There's nothing like a few burnt bridges to make me start telling home truths. Oh I'm so brave when I have nothing to lose.

I humped and lumped the lawnmower over the Ice House doorstep so that it sat inside, oily and muddy, on the mat. Electra sat next to it and I was

encouraged to see that she did not greet Cherry or Li'l Missy. Maybe even her great heart had been cooled by their betrayal.

'I absolutely forbid you to come one step further,' Cherry screeched.

'I'm so cold,' Electra sighed.

'Forbid?' I asked. 'But your shag pile needs trimming.' And I pushed the lawnmower onto the hall carpet.

'Keys?' Pierre suggested, gently.

It was so strange – he had been deceived and manipulated by this daughter of the Devil. She'd tried to strip away his identity and damage what was important to him. But was he damaged? It seemed not. He was bouncing back, exerting his will. I couldn't help comparing his resilience with my abject surrender to my own demon lover. That Son of Shaitan stripped *my* identity away and still has it. He smashed me down onto the hard cold ground and I'm still broken.

Pierre looks at Cherry as if she's the stranger who trod on his foot in a crowded train. She might have bruised his toes, she hadn't apologised, but it was all over now. Move on. She wasn't big enough or strong enough to hurt him. She wouldn't leave a scar – he hadn't cared enough to be scarred. He'd simply woken up to the fact that she'd been trying to control him and said, 'No more.'

Would I ever feel like that about the Devil's son? I couldn't imagine it. Broken, unmendable – my state of disrepair seemed to be carved like an epitaph on my gravestone.

And what of Cherry? Was her affair with Pierre simply a game she hadn't won? Or was there something deeper? Of course I didn't want there to be anything deeper. I could only deal with her by denying her humanity. I am too mean and shallow myself to handle any distress but my own.

'It's okay,' Electra whispered. 'I'll forgive her eventually, even if you won't. I'll do it for both of us.'

'It's sometimes stupid to forgive and trust someone who's injured you,' I told her.

'And I ain't stupid,' Pierre said. 'I want those keys, and there's something even more important than that – know what I'm saying?'

'No,' said Cherry, Electra and I together.

'Yes,' said Li'l Missy.

'Where *are* your meds?' Pierre asked.

'I don't *know*.'

They were looking at each other so they didn't notice. But I saw Cherry's hand flick, for a split second, towards her handbag.

'Her bag,' I said. 'They're in her handbag.'

Li'l Missy lunged towards her.

'Police!' screamed Cherry. 'Lay one finger on me and you'll be charged with assault. I'll give the police your birth name and you'll be taken in, charged as a man, convicted and sent to prison as a man. *As a man*. How will you like that? And you, Pierre, if you do one thing without my express permission, whatever happens to Missy will be your fault. You will be responsible. And don't look at me like that. This is about truth and self-respect. I want all this to go away. I want you two to contradict all the smears. Do you hear? This has gone on too long. And none of it is my fault.' She looked weak and helpless while saying this – almost pathetic.

I could feel rage rising like vomit in my throat.

She pointed to me and the lawnmower as if we were one big filthy lump. 'It's her fault,' she went on, with a catch in her voice, as if I had maliciously, for no reason, ruined her perfect life. 'I don't understand the hold a creature like that has over you. What has she done for you, Pierre, sweetie? She isn't your girlfriend. You don't owe her anything. She's mad, smelly and repellent. And yet neither you nor Missy have behaved like your true selves since she turned up. I'm not asking you to totally abandon her in the cold or anything like that, but I need you to acknowledge who is most important to you. I need you both to publicly acknowledge that I am number one in your lives. And that none of this is my fault.'

My rage overflowed. 'If you don't let me and Electra into your house, you *are* abandoning us in the cold. What do you think's out there, Acapulco Bay? Don't keep making your cruelty someone else's responsibility. This is *your* choice. No one else's. They may be weak, but you are cold and spiteful. *You* are the one who does the damage.' With that I edged around the mower and snatched the bag out of her hand.

'No one is keeping Smissy from his medicines but you. No one is using them to blackmail him into being your personal acolyte but you.' I opened the pink bag and found what looked like a mini-pharmacy. I tipped it out at Li'l Missy's feet.

'You saw that!' she cried, turning to look for police support. 'You all saw that. She's stolen my handbag.'

I opened every zip, every compartment. I shook everything out. I emptied her change purse, her wallet and her make-up kit. Everything went on the floor. Then I handed the bag back to Cherry. She refused it so I dropped it at her feet.

'Don't you accuse *me* of stealing,' I said. 'Is that *your* name on the prescriptions? Does it say, "This medicine was prescribed to Satan's scaly daughter"? No? Well then, you *stole* them. Smissy's just taking back what

belongs to him, I mean her. Tell *that* to PC Gregory.'

I was looking for two padlock keys. I didn't find them.

Ziggy's mum was pointing her camcorder at Electra. 'Hmm yes,' she said to no one in particular, 'I could send this clip straight to YouTube and the RSPCA.' She turned the camera towards Cherry's face, and went on, 'You could save yourself a lot of stress by just setting the poor dog free.'

'And how many new "daddies" has your son had in this last year alone?' Cherry shot back. 'Maybe someone should inform your ex and the Social Services.'

'Think you can make a third little boy just vanish?' Ziggy's mum said. 'Well you can't. People notice. People talk.'

Li'l Missy grabbed and counted his blister packs and bottles.

'Got everything?' Pierre asked. 'Go on then – pour yourself some water and take them. Then make us all tea and coffee. Be the perfect hostess, eh?' He watched his friend rush away to the kitchen. His relief was almost as visible as Missy's. That's love, I thought. It's not the constant negotiating that goes on between ill-matched bedmates, the constant threat and counter threat. It's the love of real friendship.

As if the Devil was whispering my thoughts into Icy Pricey's ear, she said to Pierre, 'I always knew you were gay for him. Well, that's another example of you deceiving me every day we were together. Just remember, when you're picking sides, I know about your work permit – or lack of it... ' She left her words hanging. 'Don't make me... ' she added with a genteel smile.

'Oy veh,' said Ziggy's mum, at last putting down her camcorder. 'You know what, if you were found battered to death by a heavy bronze statuette in a library somewhere, there'd be a lot of competition for Suspect-of the-Year. Me included. What's your damage? Didn't Daddy love you enough?' With that, she turned away and followed Smissy to the kitchen.

Her place in the cramped hall was taken by Suzie Pang who stared with dismay at the mess I'd made of the oatmeal shag pile. She seemed to be shrinking to the size of a ten-year-old while her face was acquiring the pinched look of an anxious old woman.

I shut the front door firmly behind me. Anyone who wanted to kick me and my lawnmower out now would find it very awkward indeed. I took off Billy's coat turned it inside out and folded it into a thick pad for Electra to lie on. 'Thank you,' she said. 'It's good to get out of the wind and rain. But can you move me so I'm closer to a radiator?'

'I'll try,' I said. 'You're chilled to the bone.'

'So are you,' she said.

'But I didn't spend all night in a shed.'

‘Excuse me?’ Pang looked bewildered, but Pierre grinned. He helped me manoeuvre Electra into a warmer place. We both chose to ignore the torn-up carpet. And I pretended not to enjoy the expression of fury and frustration that flitted across Cherry’s formerly bland, bourgeois face. She’d obviously decided that Pang was a useless champion of her rights, so she flounced away to the living room to find more promising material. I settled with my back to the hall radiator next to Electra so that I could support her head and still be able to crane my neck round the living room door to see what was going on there.

I was afraid Pang might’ve overheard Cherry threatening Pierre about his lack of a work permit. But she began with stronger stuff. ‘The child,’ she said, ‘Connor Cropper, what do you know about his abduction?’

Electra said, ‘Be brave. You’ve just been reminded how vulnerable Pierre and Li’l Missy are.’

‘And I’m not?’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Sorry, officer,’ I said. ‘I’m not sure where to start. See, I was in prison with a woman who asked me to look in on her little son when I got out. I had no idea why. So I went to Shoreditch, but I was so shocked I couldn’t think straight, and the Devil made me ask my two friends here for help and advice. I swear they only got involved because I couldn’t cope with what I found.’

‘You’re responsible?’

‘No – anyone will tell you – I’m irresponsible. Pricey Ice was right about that. That was Kerrilla Cropper’s mistake. She can’t read or write, you know. It gave her unreal expectations of me.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Slow down,’ said Pierre and Electra together.

‘You don’t have to do this,’ Pierre said.

‘You really *do* have to do this,’ Electra said. ‘You can’t go on blaming Cherry for cold-heartedly kicking that poor little puppy out of her house when you abandoned him as well. Three times.’

‘Yes, but Gamma Dora knew what she was doing and so did her daughter. He had the best night of his sorry life with them. He should’ve been safe in the hospital too, and, well, Fergus is way more responsible than I am. *I* never gave him back to Mrs Cropper and her boyfriend. Never. That was the point – getting him away from them.’

‘Excuse me? What’re you saying?’

‘Wait.’ Finally, Pierre dragged his phone out of his pocket, did some fancy thumb-work and showed Suzie Pang a photo. I couldn’t see it myself, but I could see her expression change from befuddled irritability to numbed revulsion.

‘When was this taken, and where?’

‘Coupla days ago,’ Pierre said.

‘Castle Cropper,’ I said.

‘Excuse me?’ Pang said. ‘See, Mrs Cropper’s saying that Connor was abducted ten days ago by nuns, and before that he was a perfectly healthy, happy little boy.’

‘She’s lying,’ Pierre said simply.

‘Great,’ I said. ‘I was still in chokey ten days ago so it couldn’t have been me.’

Pang ignored me. ‘She said she and her partner went to Whitstable for a break, leaving her other daughter in charge. This daughter got sick and convinced herself that Conner had left with his father’s family. But neighbours reported seeing nuns carrying the child away. Mrs Cropper only learned the truth when she came home and found her front door hanging off its hinges.’

‘Where’s Connor now?’ Electra asked, waking up and looking urgently into my eyes.

‘Don’t make me ask.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Okay,’ I said reluctantly, ‘Where’s Connor now?’

‘He was treated for trauma and dehydration at a local hospital, and then released into his grandmother’s care pending a Social Services report and this police enquiry.’

‘You didn’t...’ I cried.

‘Oh *man!*’ Pierre exclaimed in the same breath. ‘This ain’t happenin’. Say this ain’t happenin’?’

‘Are you blind?’ I said. ‘Some of his scars go back months if not years. He’s a famine-zone kid. You must’ve noticed *that*.’

‘Don’t look at me,’ Pang said. ‘A different shift dealt with it. I didn’t see him.’ She handed back Pierre’s phone. She didn’t *want* to see, even now. Pierre turned his phone off and stuffed it quickly back in his pocket. No one wanted to see.

‘Told you.’ The Devil laughed.

‘Get him out of there,’ I said. ‘They’re torturing him.’

‘You really must learn to serve me better,’ the Devil said. ‘You aren’t half as much fun when you try to do the right thing.’

‘And you can just *shut up*,’ I cried. ‘You’ve done nothing but spread chaos and malice. You’ve claimed Cherry Price as yours. Can’t you be satisfied with that? *Leave me alone!*’

‘Excuse me?’ Pang took a step back. I must’ve scared her.

‘It’s okay,’ Pierre said. ‘She’s talkin’ to Mr D again – Satan, know it?’ He

placed a comforting hand on her arm. Which didn't seem to help. He was huge and Pang was tiny.

'So you're saying that neither Miss Price nor any one of you could've hurt Connor Cropper. It was the nuns...?'

'Tea or coffee?' Smissy sang out from the kitchen. 'Milk, sugar or sweetener?' She advanced towards us with a tray of matching pink spotted mugs, milk jug and sugar bowl. She was wearing a pink gingham apron and a winsome smile. I found myself smiling back even though he was a weak, cowardly, treacherous little toad.

'I don't understand,' Pang began, but Smissy forced a steaming cup into her hands and encouraged her to help herself to milk and sugar. Smissy was inhabiting the hostess role with such brio and conviction that Pang, with her cold hands and confusion, accepted the illusion. For now.

Pierre and I exchanged a glance and wordlessly agreed to let her mistake about the 'nuns' slide. I don't know about Pierre, but I think the more mistakes and confusion that can be brought to bear on any situation involving the police, the better. They like their straight lines to join A to B. They like to know with clarity where to point the finger. And it's usually at someone like me. It's never at themselves when they make a huge blunder about a tortured little boy. Or at a genteel bourgeois blonde with expensive boots and a heart of stone. No, no, let's blame the deviants.

I took a mug of tea from Smissy, adding five sugars for energy. Ziggy came and sat on the floor cuddling up beside Electra with his back to the radiator. He looked almost as sleepy as she did.

From the living room I could hear Cherry negotiating with an emergency glass replacement firm. So could Pierre. 'I'm not copping for that bill,' he muttered to me.

'That's what *he* thinks,' the Devil murmured.

There seemed to be quite a crowd in the next room – apart from the other two cops, a handful of neighbours had climbed in through the broken window and were treating the occasion as a coffee morning. I loved them all. The ones who hated Cherry didn't much like Billy either. And no one seemed to support the cops. They were the rabble, the witnesses who were keeping the cops caged and inhibited. And they were all having fun on a boring Sunday morning.

'Don't go to sleep yet,' I said, nudging Ziggy with my foot. 'Are you good at finding things? Somewhere in this house, that horrible woman has hidden the two keys that would let this lovely dog go free. Do you think you can find them for me?'

'Can I, Mum?'

‘Course you can,’ Ziggy’s mum said. ‘I’ll help you.’ Before anyone could stop her, she led Ziggy upstairs. She would have a wonderful time examining all Cherry’s bits and pieces. Heaven save us all from the eyes of a nosey woman. It made me quite glad I had nothing. You can’t judge a person by her possessions when she has no possessions to judge. Oddly, seeing as I was so wet and cold, I was glad I lived rough and not on a street so bare and soulless that a Sunday morning spent prying into the small malicious affairs of a neighbour counted as entertainment. That’s the sort of thing my mother would have done. Hers was a discontented life and a disappointed death.

‘While you’re counting your blessings,’ sniggered Mr D, ‘who’ve you got to thank that you have no children to judge all *your* life’s achievements? What’ve you got to be so smug about?’

‘Nothing,’ I said, miserable again. ‘Absolutely bugger-all. You’ve seen to that.’

‘Excuse me?’ said Pang. Then her phone rang and everything changed.

29

A Bad Morning For The Cops

‘*What?*’ said PC Gregory, trying to elbow his way into the hall.

‘The kid,’ Pang said, keeping her voice low. ‘He was found on the stairs outside his home apparently having fallen. He has serious head injuries and is in hospital. His grandmother is accusing Ms Price and a bunch of nuns of child abuse, or at very least of the criminal damage to her front door which allowed the child to wander and put himself in danger.’

‘Okay,’ Gregory shouted, turning back into the living room. ‘Everybody not concerned with the Cropper case or not living on these premises, get out now.’

‘But we haven’t finished our hot drinks,’ one neighbour complained.

‘Switch off your phones, cameras and recording devices and leave now,’ Gregory bellowed. ‘We’ve let this farce go on long enough. It’s time for serious police work and you lot are interfering with our enquiries.’

Should I speak or should I not? It really isn’t my policy to tell the cops anything at all. But some of the same people who Gregory was evicting now were witnesses and recorders of the very fine mess that occurred outside this same house where the cops brought Grandmother Cropper to identify and reclaim poor little Connor.

I looked at Electra but she’d gone to sleep. Pierre couldn’t read minds. But the Devil could.

‘You?’ he chortled. ‘Help the police with their enquires? Catch up, moron – the police, these days, are as toothless as you. I’ve damaged the infrastructure to such a degree that anarchy is only one tiny step away.’

‘I’m beginning to agree with you about the cops,’ I replied. ‘They can’t even persuade one holier-than-thou troll to part with two keys to release a suffering dog.’

‘*Excuse me?*’ Pang suddenly focussed. She stepped over me, Electra and the

lawnmower, edging her way into the living room. She marched up to Ms Self-Righteous who was now leaving an urgent message on her solicitor's service. Not waiting for the call to finish, Pang said forcefully, 'Get those keys right now. Or I'll contact the RSPCA myself, and an emergency builder to cut the poor animal loose. And you'll have to pay for it. *And* you'll be fined for cruelty to animals. It'll be a hefty bill, believe me.'

Calmly, Miss Iceberg Supreme rang off. 'Don't take that pompous tone with me,' she said. 'You aren't even asking politely.'

'Please,' said Gregory, who seemed to have been drawn into Cherry's cheesy world where a varnish of respectability was supposed to disguise cruel actions and dishonest intentions.

'Your mother would've loved my darling Cherry,' the Devil observed. 'So feminine, so blandly pretty – like a glossy Pink Lady apple with a rotten core.'

Once again, Darling Cherry pointed a cerise tipped talon at Li'l Missy. 'I don't know why you all keep asking *me* about padlocks,' she said sweetly. 'I had nothing to do with it. It was him. He did it.'

Even the neighbour who was in the middle of climbing out of the broken window stopped to stare. Li'l Missy's face crumpled. 'But you ordered me to. You said if I didn't...'

'The woman made me do it?' Cherry asked. Her sarcasm was so veiled it nearly went unnoticed. 'Test the padlocks, the mower, the shed, for fingerprints. You won't find mine. You'll find his. So before you all make complete fools of yourselves, put the blame where it really belongs. *Not* on me.'

'Why are we talking about a bloody dog?' Nidge asked.

'Why are you still here?' Pang countered irritably.

'Because of a complaint about breaking and entering and the theft of a lawnmower.'

'The lawnmower is still on the complainant's property.'

'So why can't he deal with the French terrorists upstairs in my bedroom?' Pricey Icy asked in her most reasonable tone of voice.

'Yeah, settle the terrorist situation, why don't you?' Gregory now seemed to be extending his contempt to his own kind.

'Or I could just take myself back to the station?' Nidge said, offended. 'I seem to be surplus to requirements here.'

'Stop, all of you,' Pang said. 'One step at a time. Let's just do one thing right. Ms Price, we want those keys.'

'I don't,' muttered Gregory.

I can't tell you how delicious it was to witness three cops fighting amongst themselves.

The Pink Lady was still attacking Li'l Missy: 'It's you who hurt the dog. It's you who lied to the mad old sow you pretend to care about. Take some responsibility for your own actions. It wasn't me who abducted that poor little boy – it was you and your so-called friends. Stop faking the girly stuff. You aren't young and innocent – you're just dramatising the fact that you're nothing but a disgusting little rent boy.' Again, her tone of voice was so calm that, just listening, you'd be forgiven for missing the pure poison in the meaning – the mean, mean meaning.

But Li'l Missy heard. She was crying now, fat tears leaving black horseshoes under her eyes. I was so sorry for her – public exposure is a gut-wrenching show to watch. But I couldn't afford to care. I twisted and called through the door, 'Give me the keys, Smissy. *Now.*'

With genuine sweetness, Pierre said, 'Do it, baby.'

And at last Smissy swallowed the sobs enough to say, 'They're hanging behind the kitchen door. That's where she told me to put them.'

'Lies, lies, lies,' said the Hard-hearted Horror gently.

'I'll go,' Ziggy said eagerly. 'Can I go, Mum?'

'Come with me, kid,' Pierre said. 'Let's do this thing together.' Ziggy's sticky little paw disappeared into Pierre's huge fist and off they went.

At last the talk died. One tiny act of humanity was about to take place. Everyone wanted and watched. I almost stopped breathing.

Why do I believe in the Devil and all his minions but not in god and angels? Well, it's an evidence-based belief. But sometimes, just occasionally, a human being takes the form of an angel. Pierre spread his beautiful, glossy, black wings to forgive Li'l Missy and protect Electra and me. Sometimes, a woman or a man, for no reason at all, will bring me a cup of hot chocolate on a freezing day. Or maybe she'll let her little Starman hand me a third of a bottle of Shiraz. Or donate an old blanket for Electra to lie on. Maybe, the very next day, this person will steal a child's piggybank. But for a few minutes at a very specific time this person has an angel-heart beating in her chest.

Pierre-angel unlocked one padlock and allowed Ziggy to unlock the other. We were free. Everyone craned their necks to see what we'd do by way of celebration. It wasn't much. I let Electra slip down so that I was no longer supporting her weight on my arms and shoulders. She raised one sleepy eyelid, licked my hand and went back to sleep in her favourite position sprawled across my lap.

Me? I wasn't going anywhere yet. I had my back to a warm radiator. Have you any idea how long it takes for a homeless woman to get dry after she's been soaked by rain and has no change of clothes, no towels and nowhere to hang wet coats or blankets? Well, I do.

‘Thank god for that,’ Pang said. She wasn’t having a good morning and the tiny victory seemed to console her.

It certainly consoled me. Just for a moment I let my guard down and closed my eyes.

I dreamed I was walking down Charing Cross Road with Electra. She was on a choke chain. I was perplexed by this, but the next time I looked down at her I saw, not Electra, but Connor, and I realised that it was me who was on the choke chain and Connor was leading me.

‘Wake up,’ Gregory said, kicking my foot. ‘We need your statement.’

‘I haven’t got one.’ I opened my eyes. Electra was so deeply asleep that she didn’t stir.

Pang was sitting on the stairs, waiting, with her notebook on her knees. Gregory was between me and the front door, looming. Where was everyone else? I craned my neck to look into the living room. Chilly Cherry was sitting on one end of the sofa, talking to her phone. Nidge was at the other end looking awkward and glum. I couldn’t see Pierre and Li’l Missy at all. The neighbours had cleared out.

‘Name?’ said Pang determinedly.

This is always how it starts – the downward slide that ends in the crapper.

‘Bag with an E,’ I said. ‘That’s B-A-G-G-E. *Lady Bag*.’

‘Excuse me?’

‘Ms Price called her Angela Mary Something,’ said Gregory, he of the inconvenient memory.

‘She got it wrong,’ I said. ‘Never heard of her. Listen, the one you need to talk to is Billy next door. He can’t get out, see, and he’s been keeping track of the neighbours for years. When there’s no racing or snooker on the telly he gets lonely and bored. Well, wouldn’t you – if you couldn’t walk further than your bathroom?’

‘That’s not your name,’ Gregory said. Obviously he had an ear for the important stuff.

‘Bag, with an E. Prove me wrong. The thing is, see, in this day of mass communication you don’t have to rely on my faulty memory for facts and figures. Every one of those neighbours has an electronic gismo, and everyone took pictures of what happened last night when Ms Frosty gave Connor back to the woman who’d abused him so dreadfully. I can’t blame you lot – you hadn’t heard the story or seen the picture then. *But she had*. She knew just how desperate the situation was.’

‘We can easily find out,’ Gregory said. ‘Your fingerprints, photograph and all your details are on record.’

‘Dig up the shed,’ I said, desperation for a drink, knocking like rim-shots at

the back of my skull. 'She's as good as murdered one little boy already. You don't have to believe me – talk to Billy.'

'Name?' said Gregory.

The blessed, sainted, doorbell rang.

It was as if the house inhaled cold damp air as Gregory opened the front door. 'What?'

'Emergency Glass Repair,' said one of the new arrivals.

'CID,' said the other.

'Oh joy,' said Pang softly.

'Oh shit,' I said.

'Well, well, well,' said Gregory. 'If us poor plods uncover enough nuts, sooner or later the squirrels come along for a feed.'

'Pang,' said Pang, standing up quickly.

'Hobbs,' said the CID man. 'I'm here to assess the sitch. Terrorism?'

'Someone needs to give me a debit card and sign my worksheet,' said the Emergency Glass Man. 'And let's get our arses in gear – I haven't had my lunch and I got two more callouts already. Where's the householder?' He wasn't going to let a little thing like terrorism get in his way.

'Ms Price,' Gregory called. 'Someone's come to mend your window.' He seemed very happy to let the broken window trump the CID.

'Thank goodness,' said Cherrylzebug, coming to the sitting room doorway.

'I can't get my tools in here, love, without you clear the hall and get rid of that sodding lawnmower.'

'They aren't terrorists,' I said. 'I think they're environmental activists who lost their way.'

'Eh?' said Hobbs.

'Don't listen to a word she says,' said Miss Pink Perfect. 'She's not all there.'

'A shoe short of a pair,' confirmed Gregory.

'Their concern for penguins might be a clue,' I said.

'They assaulted me in my own home,' said Baby-Cherry in her Tweetie Pie voice.

'What you got a lawnmower in your hall for anyway?' said Glass Man to Ice Woman.

'As an instrument of chaos,' said Chaos Incarnate, 'that lawnmower's done sterling work. One of your better acts. I approve.'

'You've served your purpose,' I said to the lawnmower, 'and now you must go.' I struggled stiffly to my feet. 'I'll put it back in the shed, shall I?' Electra got up and stretched too.

'Pick it up and carry it,' squawked She-who-cares-more-for-hall-

carpets-than-for-babies-or-dogs.

Meanwhile Hobbs was saying to Gregory, 'Just go up those stairs, arrest the two terrorists and take them to the nick. What's stopping you?'

'My pleasure,' said Gregory. He was only prevented from taking the stairs two at a time by Pierre, Li'l Missy and Tantie coming down laden with bags.

'They're going to arrest Zach and Sylvie,' I said.

'*Et pourquoi pas?*' Tantie said, shrugging.

'We're leaving,' Pierre said to his icy ex.

'I don't understand why you're treating me so badly,' she said, sniffing pathetically. 'All I ever did was love you and give you and your friend a home.'

'Where are you going?' Pang asked. 'We'll need an address where you can be contacted.'

'Next door,' Pierre told her. 'Even a racist pig like Billy looks good after this.'

'Not you,' Pang said to me. 'We need your statement.'

'I'll just help with the lawnmower and come straight back.' I kicked Pierre's ankle as he edged towards the door. He turned and grabbed the mower's front roller, and together we half pushed, half carried it over the doorstep. Li'l Missy and Tantie followed us out.

Even in the confusion I noticed that at last Tantie was wearing her own boots and they gave her strength and stature. Some women's self-worth seems to depend upon their footwear.

30

Gimme Shelter

We were only allowed into Billy's house because Tantie refused to go in on her own. Billy's need for pie depended on Tantie and temporarily overcame his racism, ageism and genderism.

His thirst for gossip depended on me. So after I'd fed Pierre, Li'l Missy, Tantie and myself on purloined chicken soup and rice pudding I went up to tell stories. The first thing he said, before even saying 'hello', was, 'The blond one, y'know, the gay one, yeah, d'you think he'd show me his boobs?'

'You're disgusting, Billy,' I said.

'I'm just an ordinary bloke,' he said. 'Whatever he's got below the waist, he's quite tasty in the upstairs department. So, are the cops going to arrest the cow next door? Are they still there?'

I looked out of the window. A patrol car and the unmarked car Hobbs had arrived in hadn't moved. I wondered if Nidge had taken Zach and Sylvie away. It was still raining but the rain now had a sleety look as it hit the windowpane.

The Glass Man was boarding up the Ice House window, although it seemed to me that a little sleet in the living room wouldn't make much difference to such a cold climate. On the other side of the road I saw that Pang and Gregory were being let into Ziggy's house.

I said, 'Do you really think that polar bear next door did away with her ex's little boy?'

'Could of,' he said. 'She really couldn't stand that poor bloke paying attention to anything that wasn't her – even if it was just a cigarette. But if you ask me, what she *really* wanted was the house. That's why she had him took away by the blokes with butterfly nets.'

'She couldn't have killed his kid. There'd be too many people looking out for him. Like the mother. Behave, Billy – you just want someone to pull that

shed down, don't you?"

'Not so green as you're cabbage-looking.' His eyes disappeared into a roll of cheek fat. Billy was smiling.

'She'd never do anything evil herself,' I said. 'She'd make someone else do it for her. And she'd always be able to justify it or explain it away. Like Connor. If he dies it won't be *her* fault. It'll be mine for going to see him in the first place. Or mine, Missy's and Pierre's for trying to rescue him. It'd be the Social Services' and the cops', for giving him back to his abusive grandmother. But never, ever, hers for knowing and not caring.'

'That piece of all right with the big bazongas was a grandmother?' Billy asked, shocked, the smile vanishing. 'Too effing old. Way too old.'

'She wasn't too old for you night before last. Anyway, Billy, how old are *you*?'

'I was drinking,' he said. Which of course explained everything. I'm not joking. It really does explain everything.

It was growing dark, and sleet was beginning to slap the window. I watched as Pang and Gregory came out of Ziggy's house. They looked hard at Billy's window, but went next door instead.

'How about a beer now?' I asked.

'Okay, but I ain't giving you none.'

'You're a gent,' I said. I left his foetid bedroom quickly but not quickly enough to prevent myself from hearing him say, 'This is *my* house and you ain't invited.'

In the tiny back bedroom I collected all the clothes I'd taken from the charity shop bag. An armful – more than I'd owned for a long time. I carried them down to the kitchen. Tantie had hung Billy's coat in front of the oven to dry. It was kind of her, but now that she had shoes and a handbag I felt the distance between us. I gave her a can of beer and pointed at the ceiling. She made a face but took it upstairs.

I put on as many layers as I could, and then found two bin bags, shoved one inside the other for double protection and stuffed the rest of the clothing inside. Then I put on Billy's coat. It was still damp, but so much better than nothing.

Electra was in the sitting room sleeping in front of an electric fire. Pierre and Missy were deep in conversation.

I said, 'The cops are coming and I have to go. You'll be all right but it isn't safe for me and Electra. North Pole Nora next door saw to that when she told them I'd broken parole.'

'You can't take Electra out in this weather,' Missy protested. She looked so cosy in her cashmere jumper, sitting nose to nose with Pierre. She was my

treacherous, sweet friend. It nearly broke my heart.

Without being called, Electra got up and came to my side. She had nothing to say to me, but she was ready. The Devil, who always has something to say, commented, 'Save yourself and kill your dog. Yep, that's the kind of deal I approve of.'

Trying to ignore him, I said, 'I don't suppose either of you remembered Electra's coat.'

'You're never going to forgive me, are you?' Li'l Missy said, and began rummaging in a huge striped beach bag.

'It wasn't malice,' Pierre said, holding his hand out to Missy. 'It's weakness. She scares easy.'

'So do I,' I said. 'So does Electra.'

'You're tough and independent,' Pierre said.

'No I'm not. I'm homeless. I *have* to put up with whatever life throws at me. I don't have a choice and it doesn't make me brave. I'm running away now. Watch me.'

Silently, with tears magnifying her pretty blue eyes, Smister held out two items. One was Electra's old green waterproof coat. The other was pink, mohair and hand-knitted. The words 'Lady Bag's Lady Dog, were appliquéd to one side in lime green felt.

'Put it on her,' I said. And Electra waited patiently while Smissy adjusted the doggy sweater and fastened the loops and pearl buttons underneath. Pearl buttons didn't save it as an outfit – only Smister could get away with a colour combo like that. Electra couldn't. It looked... well, actually it looked like a dog's dinner on her.

But it was warm and dry and I could see how much work had gone into it. I fitted the old waterproof over the top.

'The Ambo,' Pierre said, fishing in his pocket for keys. 'Go there, out of the weather.' He couldn't find his keys. Which reminded me that I still had them in Billy's pocket.

'Not safe,' I said. 'The Arctic Assassin knows about it. She'll have told the cops.' I went to the kitchen to pretend to find the keys.

'Keep them,' Old Nick whispered in my ear. 'The cops will arrest my darling girl and then you can hide in her house. No one will ever think of looking for you there.'

I stopped. 'How will I know she's been arrested, and for how long?' It was such a tempting idea.

'Doesn't matter,' he sniggered. 'You saw how easy it was for Zach and Sylvie to expel her. It's payback time.'

'I know,' I agreed, shoving Pierre's keys back in Billy's pocket. Electra's

claws clicking on the kitchen tiles made me turn. She stood, her head cocked, ears pricked, waiting to go out. Her citrine eyes stroked my troubled mind.

‘Wait a minute,’ I said to her.

‘Wait a minute,’ I said to the Old Goat. ‘You called her, “My darling,” but you’re suggesting I fuck her up. Why?’

‘She’s not my only darling,’ he said soothingly. ‘You can be my darling girl too. You’re yearning for love and acceptance. You were *born* yearning. I know it and I know *you*.’

‘No,’ I said, ‘no, you don’t know me at all. If *she*’s your darling, I don’t want to be. If you’ve chosen her you can’t have me. Anyone who chooses her is beneath contempt.’

‘Then I choose you,’ he said simply and sincerely. ‘No contest.’

‘You clever, lying bastard,’ I said. But I was so moved I sat down on a kitchen chair, laid my head on the table and wept. He knew me so well. He knew what I wanted. There’s no one else in my life who knows me like that. And there never has been.

‘What else are you going to do?’ my fiendish friend whispered. ‘Risk the life of the one creature you say you love? Abandon the only two people who even pretend to care about you?’

I cannot begin to express how much I needed a drink at that moment. The pressure was squashing my brain to the size of a walnut. My heart was dribbling out of my eyes in heavy drops of salt water. My hands shook, sweat greased my skin, my guts lurched and squirmed. The table I laid my head on wallowed like a raft on a choppy sea. I was afraid I’d die. I was afraid I wouldn’t.

Pierre said, ‘Wassup – you look like shit.’

‘Sorry,’ I said. ‘I need a drink. I really need...’ My tongue clung like fur to the roof of my mouth. I turned to look at Electra. ‘How dumb *am* I?’ I asked her. How many days, weeks, years ago had she told me to my face that it was dumb to look to a dog for guidance? How long ago was it that she told me that a dog can’t lie because she can’t talk? So I said, ‘Who do I listen to? The intelligent, articulate one who can tell me what to do? Or the one who can’t talk?’

‘Say again?’ said Pierre, while Electra just sat looking at me.

Waiting for me to do the right thing.

I fumbled in my pocket and my trembling fingers dropped Pierre’s keys on the floor.

‘You’re blowing your only chance,’ warned Damian Dark.

‘You found them,’ Pierre said, relieved.

‘I can’t talk now,’ I said. ‘I’m sick.’

'No shit. What we gonna do with you?'

'I can't think. Can I have some money?'

'You'll just get hammered. That's why you're sick, dumb-ass.'

'Wrong,' said Mr D. Dark Esq. 'You're sick because you *aren't* hammered.'

And this time he was telling the painful truth.

'I'm off,' I said, stumbling to my feet. I couldn't breathe, and I didn't get as far as the front door.

'Stop,' Missy cried. 'You can't just run away and leave us to carry the can.'

'She's sick,' Pierre said.

'Give me your phone?' I asked. 'Then you can find me if you want.'

'I'll give her my old phone,' Pierre said.

'She'll sell it. She'll lose it. Someone'll rob it off her.'

'Yeah, well, I have to find it first and charge it.'

'No time – bummer off,' I said. But it was me who was bugging off. I opened the door and went out into the idle sleety rain that looked as if it had the stamina to last all night.

'Stop,' Li'l Missy Sinister cried again. 'Don't be such a drama queen. I've only got a fiver, but you can have it.' She handed me a crumpled note.

Pierre found his money clip. He seemed a little surprised that there wasn't more in it, but he peeled off a tenner and gave me that too. Smister rolled back my sleeve and wrote his phone number and Pierre's on my forearm. 'It's not like you're going to wash it off, is it?' he added cattily.

Pierre said, 'About the cops and Connor – we've just gotta stick to the facts.'

'I know,' I said, fifteen quid vibrating in my hand. 'Just don't let Miss Fridge-Freezer put *all* the blame on us. She knew where Connor came from.'

'She knew,' Pierre said, frowning as if his head hurt.

'She even pretended to be shocked,' Smissy said.

'Goodbye,' I said hurriedly, because I legitimately owned fifteen pounds and I knew that I could make myself feel better very shortly. I shut the door on their anxious faces and Electra and I took the few steps across Billy's front yard to the road. I arrived there at the same time as a little white Kia. The driver's door opened and an umbrella unfurled itself. It was followed by Alicia in a fleecy coat and funky red boots. Pierre would not remain anxious for long.

She said, 'Hi, what a lovely dog. I didn't know you had one.' She bent and laid a hand on Electra's head. Electra flattened her ears and accepted the hand. I found myself accepting the hand too.

I said, 'Give Pierre a message from me? It's about a mortgage. Ask him if his name is on the deeds. If I'm right, probably all he did was set up and sign a Standing Order. In which case he only has to talk to his bank and cancel it.

And maybe tell the mortgage holder what he's done.'

'A mortgage?' she said. 'A Standing...?'

'Order. He'll explain, or he won't.' I was exhausted, but I added, 'He's been paying for a very bad decision.'

'Yeah, well, we've all done that.' It was her rueful, embarrassed smile that made me believe that maybe she wasn't a troll. Trolls don't admit to bad decisions. They are always the victims of other people's wickedness or stupidity, never their own. Pierre's luck was changing.

Mine wasn't. There was still a pair of cops carrying out house-to-house enquiries, it was still sleeting and I was still in perilous Troll territory. But Alicia knew none of this. She stopped me from hurrying away with a hand on my sleeve, looking at me without flinching. I felt that she actually saw me and yet her gaze remained kindly. She said, 'Can I trust him?'

'He's not an average guy,' I said. 'But he is a guy.'

'Cynical,' she said, smiling. She was still waiting, but she held her umbrella over Electra and me, protecting us. So I said, 'Can you trust yourself? Can you be kind and almost honest? He's had a crocodile in his head. He needs to replace her with something better.'

'A what?'

'A crocodile.' I was backing away, 'Ice in his hot soup,' I said by way of explanation. 'A tapeworm in his tummy.' I was walking away, muttering, sorry for the kind lady's confusion. But I stopped. The right word had just occurred to me. '*A parasite!*' I shouted.

Alicia, almost at Billy's door, turned. '*What?*'

'No man's at his best when he's being eaten from the inside. Tapeworms aren't like mistletoe, you know – they kill their host in the end.'

But by the time I'd finished expressing that thought I was halfway to the shops and not even in the same street as Alicia.



'What now?' Electra asked.

We were walking through Trafalgar Square to the National Gallery steps. To the right was the National Portrait Gallery. That was where I ran into the Devil last year. It is, after all, a cultural hotspot.

'You didn't come for the culture,' she murmured.

'I came for the life,' I said.

'Well, where is it?' Not an unreasonable question. Sleet had turned to snow. It was melting the moment it touched down, but it really was snow and what with it being Sunday evening Trafalgar Square was nearly deserted – a

very uncommon sight. But I wasn't unhappy. I sat on a bench close to a sheltering wall. Electra hopped up beside me and I opened Billy's billowing coat to cover us both so that we could cuddle.

Up to now I didn't feel I'd been alone with Electra at all. I felt as if I'd spent my freedom so far in a jostling crowd of huge people. I'd been squashed in the scrum. There were too many voices in my head.

'I need a little peace and quiet in a familiar place,' I said.

'That's all very well,' Electra said, 'but shouldn't we be looking for somewhere to sleep?'

'You know where you are in chokey,' I said. 'You know who your enemies are, and you know *where* they are. There aren't many surprises and there's always a bed.'

'Nostalgic for prison?' she said, tucking her head under my chin. 'For a place where there are no dogs or red wine?'

'There's been too much going on in the real world. Too many feelings. I can't cope with it all.'

'You numbed out while you were inside.'

'Don't knock it. A little numbness cuts down on confusion. It gives you space to think.'

'Okay, genius,' she said, yawning, 'have a think and then tell me where we're going to sleep. But don't take too long.'

I looked at Trafalgar Square which seemed to be floating upwards behind a gauzy curtain of motionless snow. What would I have done before I'd had friends and an Ambo to sleep in, before I'd conned my way into a disabled guy's house?

'Juliet House,' I said. 'They keep a couple of places for women.'

'And they don't bar dogs there.' Electra gave me an approving nuzzle.

I took the half bottle of Algerian red out of Billy's pocket. There was an inch left at the bottom. I felt so proud of myself. I'd only bought a half bottle, I'd taken it slow and I hadn't drunk it all at once. I was proving to myself that I could drink sensibly.

'Mmm,' my friend murmured. 'We'll see.' And off we went, walking North, to try our luck at Juliet House.



Ocean Freedom checked my prison release papers. They'd tightened up procedure while I was away. These days you have to be able to *prove* that you have nowhere to sleep before a shelter will let you in.

'But you know me,' I said. 'We've been here before.'

‘Yeah,’ Ocean said with a clear lack of enthusiasm. ‘Well, as it happens you’re in luck. There was a cancellation. So come in and we’ll process you in time for supper.’

There had been changes. Instead of a small room with two bunks, Electra and I had a tiny room to ourselves. It was not so much a room as a pod. And, wonder of wonders, I was given an electronic key. I could leave my bag in the pod and no one could come in and steal it. Instead of the dormitory that used to sleep thirty men there were now thirty pods off a bright white central corridor that led to a day room. It reminded me of prison except that the pods were much smaller than cells, and *I had a key*.

Juliet House isn’t a house at all. It’s a shelter built underneath a church. One half is in the crypt and the other is in the basement of the church hall next door. I don’t know why it’s called Juliet House.

In spite of the location, the people who run the shelter aren’t particularly churchy. Some volunteers are but you can avoid them. What you can’t avoid is the weight of grey stone blocks that were employed to build an enormous, cavernous house where believers could talk to a nonexistent deity. This house of pointless worship was built at about the same time and with the same materials as Her Majesty’s Prison which had lately been my home.

It was a snowy Sunday night so more than forty men were crammed into the day room, waiting for supper. There were probably more of us in the basement than there were celebrating Evensong in the huge church above.

Dogs, if they were admitted, had to be kept on a leash. Electra was attached to me by one of Li’l Missy’s silk scarves and I kept my hand on her slender head, overwhelmed by so many ragged men. I was utterly disconnected – claustrophobic yet alone. There was nobody in the whole world who knew me and, in turn, I recognised no one. The big TV high up on the wall was showing a football match with the sound turned off: twenty-two more unknown men in conflict, with only three referees to keep order.

There were no refs in the day room and the overcrowding made the atmosphere edgy. My skin prickled with it.

‘It’s okay,’ Electra whispered, although I could feel the tremor in her body as clearly as she could feel mine.

‘It isn’t okay,’ said the Trespasser into churches. ‘Church, prison, what’s the dif, eh? Rules and regs. Behaviour modification. Keep your nose clean. Watch your step. No one here wishes you well, and everyone means you harm.’

I hate and fear that place in my head where he finds a hole he can slither into and shove Electra’s voice aside. But I couldn’t reply – Electra and I seemed to be the only females in the room. Hostile eyes hammered into us like nails. I was just one more snout in the too small trough.

A few moments later, when panic had smoothed its ruffled feathers to manageable levels, I saw Scots Gary by himself at the furthest corner of the room, staring blankly up at the screen. I was relieved. If he was here, Sick Hazel would be too, and I'd have someone to talk to. Climbing over legs, manoeuvring between tables and chairs, I went to join him. There was nowhere to sit so I hunkered down with my back to the wall.

'Oh, it's you,' he said when he noticed me. His eyes had a flinty squinty look and his mouth was pinched and dry-looking.

Crap, I thought, that's not from slurping cider – that's rocks. I said, 'Where's Hazel?'

'Bitch left me,' he snarled, looking back at the screen.

I was stunned. Gary and Hazel were like conjoined twins – I've never known why. Who the hell can fathom what other people want and find in each other? I can't.

I put my arms around Electra and squatted silently. There was nowhere else to sit, and I couldn't think of a single thing to say to Gary that might penetrate the wall of rage he'd built around himself. Soon the grille between the kitchen and the day room would go up and we'd all queue for food. Then I'd find a place as far away from him as possible.

Sunday supper was chicken nuggets and fries. On a Sunday when there are few volunteers they bung whatever's easiest in the oven and serve it with great dollops of ketchup and brown sauce instead of a vegetable. It made a change from chicken noodle soup and rice pudding.

At another table, Gary gobbled with angry speed. In three minutes he'd finished half his food. Then he stood up abruptly, raised his plate above his head and hurled it onto the floor. The plastic plate bounced harmlessly. Infuriated, Gary said, 'And the rest of you diseased wankers can fuck off to hell too.' With that message delivered into an uncaring crowd he stamped out of the day room, pushing aside anyone in his way.

Nobody except me watched him go. Everyone else was suddenly fascinated by the dogs. Electra had got up from her place at my knee and wandered over to examine the fallen food, her silk scarf trailing on the sticky floor. She was joined by an unleashed lurcher and a Staffordshire bull terrier. All three, meeting at the mess on the floor, hesitated and eyed each other warily.

Tension in the crowded room built. Some of the men stood up so they could get a better view. With a sense of unease, I realised that they were gagging for a dog fight. A dog fight would relieve the tension. Time comes in a man's life when he needs to see blood and carnage. If the dogs fought maybe the men wouldn't have to. Or maybe it would be the permission they needed to have a go at each other too. Some of them were boiling for it. I could smell it

on their breath.

Electra acted first. She broke eye contact with the other two dogs, lowered her head and began to eat the chicken nuggets and fries closest to her. My heart almost jumped into my throat. Did she know how close she was to a mauling?

I called her softly, not wanting my fear to show in my voice. But all I could hear was nervous breathing, and Ashmodai whispering in my ear, 'Place of safety, eh? There's no safe place for you, my girl. You or your scrawny bitch.'

'All I wanted,' I told him, 'was somewhere to go where Pang and Gregory wouldn't do my head in with questions I couldn't answer – where I could shelter from the snow.'

'Guys, guys, guys,' Ocean Freedom called from behind the kitchen counter. 'Chill. Dogs must be restrained or I'll have to put them and their owners out.'

'You and whose army?' said my neighbour at table. He sounded so much like the Devil that I turned to look at him. He was thin and his hair was thinner. All his bulk came from layers of dirty combat fatigues.

He was right. How could a guy who'd changed his name to Ocean Freedom by deed poll cope effectively with forty blokes spoiling for action?

I got up and went over to Electra. I picked up the scarf and pulled her away from the chicken nuggets. The lurcher and the Staffie were beginning to circle each other and I wanted us to be as far away as possible. I wanted to go back to my food, but when I turned to look I saw that the thin guy was eating it. He met my eyes with a sneery wink and I could almost hear him saying, 'What're *you* going to do about it? Eh? Eh?'

Whatever you do in a shelter, don't leave your plate unattended. If you have the choice, sit next to a junkie. Junkies don't eat much. It isn't food they're hungry for so probably they won't steal yours.

The Staffie moved first, lunging forward, heavy-shouldered, razor-toothed. Speed was the lurcher's defence and attack. He whipped away and whirled around, nipping the Staffie's thigh before backing off and squaring up again. Head hunched between his shoulders, lip and nose wrinkled up – daggers drawn. A thin trickle of blood appeared on the Staffie's chestnut coat. A shout went up in the dayroom. Some celebrated, the others were surprised.

'Enough!' roared a new voice. It was a tall thin woman wearing oven gloves on both hands – one of which gripped a long-handled wooden spoon while the other wielded a metal spatula. She burst out of the kitchen.

'Who are the owners?' she yelled. 'You should be ashamed of yourselves.'

I didn't think she stood a chance. She was wearing a blue butcher's apron and looked like one of those middle class volunteers who seek redemption among the unwashed plates and undead homeless.

Coins and tobacco were changing hands. Bets which had been laid on the lurcher and the Staffie were now being laid on the woman with the wooden spoon as well.

‘Lorelei! Don’t!’ begged Ocean Freedom from behind the counter.

Electra gazed up at me imploringly. ‘Don’t cry,’ I said. ‘It’s not their fault. There are only bad owners – never bad dogs.’

If she could have spoken she would’ve said, ‘But it’s snowing outside. The bad owners will make the good dogs sleep in the snow.’

‘She’s right,’ said the Hammer of the Homeless reflectively. ‘I always win. Let chaos reign.’

‘It’s snowing,’ I shouted feebly. ‘Don’t make the dogs go out in the snow.’ But it wasn’t just that. Both Electra and I were worried about the lurcher. He wore his greyhound heritage well – he was very fast. But he was too playful. He didn’t have the broad muscular jaw of a bull terrier, or the single-mindedness. His idea of a scrap was nip and run, nip and run. But, in the crowded day room, there wasn’t enough space to run far and he’d never do enough damage to stop the Staffie. If he was trapped and the Staffie got his teeth in it would be curtains for him.

In spite of being jostled and blocked, volunteer Lorelei waded into the action. I watched anxiously. Oven gloves wouldn’t be much protection from a Staffie. Not that she cared – everything within range got walloped by her wooden spoon.

Ocean Freedom overcame his reluctance and went to join her. He must have hit the panic button because I heard the sound of running feet in the corridor between the front office and the day room.

‘Someone will have called the police,’ Satan informed me casually.

That fixed it. I picked up a pepper pot from the table nearest me and unscrewed the top as I barged my way into the middle of the man-crowd. Ignoring the lurcher, I threw the pepper straight into the Staffie’s face just as he was charging at his opponent’s soft underbelly.

Talk about single-minded – the Staffie hardly flinched. He was coming on like a van with no brakes. All I could do to save the lurcher was kick him aside.

Blinded by pepper, unable to stop, the Staffie missed the lurcher and ran full tilt into a table leg. Ocean Freedom, inspired, started throwing pepper in all directions.

Lorelei thrust the wooden spoon between the stunned Staffie’s teeth and hung on like a bad cold, effectively stopping him from biting anything else.

A man with a beard and streaming eyes gut-barged me backwards into an overturned chair, shouting, ‘You kicked my dog. I’ll do you – see if I don’t.’

By this time I was on the floor, my legs tangled like a lover's with the legs of the chair. There was nothing I could do so I said, 'Go on then. I've been already been kicked by kids and knocked over by a bus. If you can find anywhere that isn't already covered in bruises, get your licks in now. Don't hang about. I can't stand waiting.'

The Staffie's owner took over from volunteer Lorelei but couldn't persuade his dog to give up the wooden spoon. Lorelei got up and whacked my bearded assailant with the spatula. 'See to your dog, Chris,' she commanded. 'You don't want to be out in the cold looking for another place to sleep at this time of night.'

'I could do you for assault an' all,' Chris threatened weakly. 'You're not supposed to touch the customers.'

'Customers be damned!' There was something so brisk and matter-of-fact about Lorelei that Chris backed away grumbling and sucking chicken nugget crumbs out of his beard. But Ocean Freedom looked alarmed and disapproving as he followed him – presumably to make sure he wouldn't sue the shelter. Don't laugh. It *has* happened.

Lorelei held out a hand and hauled me to my feet with surprising strength for someone so thin. Now that I could see her up close she looked as if she was in her seventies.

'I'll fix you another plate,' she said. 'Did someone feed your dog?'

'Yes. But she's always hungry, and when Scot's Gary threw his plate... '

'I know, I saw. But you'll have to forgive him – Hazel died this afternoon. You got her room.'

'But he said... '

'I know – "Bitch left me" – that's what he said to me. He's furious with her for dying.'

'Okay,' I said, although I was shocked. Because death is desertion of a sort. And if that's how it takes you, that's how it is.

'You knew her,' Lorelei said. 'How are you doing?'

'It's weird. Sometimes I thought, you know, everybody has a *thing*, and sometimes I thought being sick was hers.' I was remembering her familiar creaky cough. 'I thought, you know, she'd be Sick Hazel forever. But now she's Dead Hazel.'

'And that changes everything.' Lorelei let herself into the kitchen with her electronic key and then locked herself in. We 'customers' aren't allowed in or we'll steal whatever isn't glued down. And not one of us can be trusted with sharp knives.

She appeared at the hatch with a plate of food for me and another bowlful of dogfood. I was pleased to see Electra's appetite had returned. 'What a couple

of days you've had,' I murmured to her, gently pulling her velvet ears. She raised her head momentarily, giving me a beautiful topaz glance. 'Will you ever forgive Ms Spiteful for the lawnmower?'

'She'll forget,' sneered Lord Snooty. 'If you forget, you don't have to forgive.'

'Well, I won't forget.'

'Yeah, you will. As soon as you've taken a handful of those Snoozeezys you bought at the all-night chemist on your way over here, and stashed in your left shoe, you too will forget my Little Miss Perfect. And you'll cease to care about Connor, my broken son. You'll sleep snug in the private pod which is no bigger than Hazel's coffin, and forget all about friends, enemies and smashed up children.'

'I do hope so,' I said.

Several men were still wiping their eyes and noses. Ocean Freedom was helping the Staffie owner bathe the Staffie's eyes with water. The Staffie still had the wooden spoon between his teeth and was refusing to give it up.

'I bet pinch of Golden Virginia on him,' said a shaven-headed guy, holding his mug out for more tea. 'Now all bets are void, thanks to you.'

I couldn't tell if I was being congratulated or blamed. Nor could I tell who he was talking to – Lorelei or me. I stayed close to the kitchen counter. Sometimes the homeless world seems to be populated entirely by damaged men and I feel outnumbered and powerless. At those times, when I'm even less popular than normal, I'm grateful that people like Lorelei are armed with spatulas and unshakeable ethics.

I wanted to hide away in my claustrophobic pod with Electra. I wanted to sleep safe and deep. But first I had to take Electra out into the snow. I put on Billy's coat and swathed my head in an extra jumper twisted like a deranged turban against the chill. I covered Electra in her waterproof. One of the care-workers let us out. On our way up the stone outside steps we met two cops coming down. Heart in mouth I flattened myself against the handrail, lowering my head and eyes.

They barely glanced at me. But I didn't breathe again till I was out on the slushy pavement and hurrying away from the police car, parked illegally with two wheels up on the pavement. We were a long way from North by Northwest of the North Circular, and I knew the care workers had called them because they were afraid the dogfight would go rampageous, but I didn't want to be seen, recognised, thought about or remembered by a cop. Especially not remembered. Cops have such inconveniently long memories.

I rushed Electra round a corner, out of sight of the shelter, before letting her stop to pee. We stood, half protected, in an abandoned shop doorway, and

I watched the snow blow horizontal from East to West along the deserted street. It was still melting on the warmer pavement, but more slowly now. If it kept going it would become a white blanket by morning. Pretty but deadly.

I did not know how I was managing to stand. The grief and anger, the danger and confusion, tumbled like an avalanche over me. Manipulation, betrayal, sleeplessness and pain soaked me to the bone. The freezing weight of it was suddenly unbearable and I found myself weeping. The whole helpless, hopeless mess of cruelty and inhumanity found expression in gulping sobs of sorrow for, of all things, Hazel's death. I'd heard her soggy cough for the last time only a few days ago. She had shared her cider and warned me about Antabuse – acts of generosity from someone who had nothing. Well, she didn't have nothing – she'd had Gary, a forever companion, a love of sorts. Now she was dead and Gary had nothing but anger left in his heart. That's worth a few tears, isn't it? I didn't know her story and now I never would. She, like a snowflake on a warm pavement, vanished in seconds. Isn't that cause for sorrow?

'Tears dripping on a wet pavement,' hooted the Count of Contempt. 'What a fitting tribute.'

I would have answered, trying to transform sadness into a more bearable anger, but a figure hurrying by, swathed in a thick coat and protected by a red umbrella, caught sight of us and stopped. It was Lorelei.

'What're you doing out here?'

'Waiting till I'm sure the police have gone.'

'They've gone,' she said abruptly. 'Why are you crying?'

'Why not?'

'Why not, indeed?' She made it sound like profound philosophy.

How might my life have turned out if I'd had a mother like her? She didn't say, 'What have you got to cry about?' or 'Shut up – others have it far worse,' or 'Stop feeling sorry for yourself, you're showing me up.' No, she simply told me that sorrow was justified whatever the occasion and stood patiently by, almost as patient as Electra, waiting for the storm to pass. Then she took off one glove, reached into her pocket and handed me a fistful of tissues.

She watched while I mopped my face. Then she took off the other glove and gave me the pair, saying only, 'Get warm. You're exhausted. It's safe to sleep now.'

And it was. Safe behind a locked door in my coffin-sized pod I snuggled into a duvet that smelled only a little stale. With Electra warming my feet I crashed headfirst into the black.

31

A Place Of Safety

I stayed at Juliet House for three days because the temperature dropped below freezing three days in a row. The Cold Weather Protocol was in place, so no one was kicked out or turned away from the door either. The dayroom filled with emergency mattresses and sleeping bags. Tempers crackled. Food supplies and volunteers to take on the extra kitchen work were scarce.

But were we grateful? You'd think we would be, wouldn't you? But instead we acted as if we were the paying guests of a five star hotel being offered inadequate service. If lunch was ten minutes late, if there weren't enough clean cups for instant tea or coffee, if someone had crapped in the shower and no one had cleaned it up, we complained. We made a fuss, we felt hard done by and we expressed ourselves loudly. We behaved as if we, the victims of fate, were *owed* compensation. Food and shelter were ours by *right*. So do it better you lazy volunteers. Why? I don't know. Maybe for once we were safe from being moved on so we could stop pretending to be meek and grateful and behave like spoiled tourists instead.

Electra and I slept a lot. I could swallow Snoozezy's whenever I wanted to. It was what made life without red wine bearable in my claustrophobic pod. It kept me out of reach of the damaged men. It gave my poor pummelled body a chance to heal.

Outside, although the main roads had been ploughed and salted, it was quiet. The pavements were icy. Some conscientious citizens had swept a few yards outside their own property, but the majority hadn't bothered. Electra and I slipped and slid carefully round the block a couple of times a day seeing scarcely anyone.

Most action took place outside Juliet House where, in spite of the Cold Weather Protocol, there was no amnesty on tobacco or booze. Groups of

bickering men huddled on the church steps trying to smoke with their gloves on. Sometimes a couple of guys, going stir crazy, would collect money from other guys desperate enough to trust them, drag themselves off to the nearest shop and come back with tobacco, cider or beer. All of this had to be consumed hurriedly, outside in the freezing cold.

I went to the shop too, but discovered they only sold red wine in two litre bottles. Even I couldn't manage to drink two litres at a single sitting – which I'd have to do because I couldn't smuggle the rest inside. You can't just walk in to Juliet House. You have to be buzzed in by the professionals in the front office. Even then there is a kind of airlock where you are assessed for drunkenness, aggression and instability. If they want to, the professionals can tell you to 'walk it off', and send you away till you're calmer and more amenable to Juliet House rules. They can refuse to let you in at all. They can, and will, call the cops on you if you're violent and won't go away. Charity for the homeless begins, not at home, but in an airlock.

But, after the threat of the dogfight had passed, as long as I kept myself to myself, I felt relatively safe and comfortable. I should, I thought, have come here as soon as I left prison instead of relying on Pierre and Li'l Missy to ease me into the kind of freedom I'd been yearning for. How was I to know that their hearts, minds and courage had been undermined by a daughter of Damian Dark?

So I settled into the routine of regular meals being given to me, of cups of tea I didn't have to make myself, of soap and water, of early bedtimes in a warm, dry bed. I was resting, I told myself, building myself and Electra up – I'd be out of Juliet House by Christmas.

In fact I probably could have stayed until the Snoozeezys ran out and my thirst became critical, or until the shelter professionals kicked me out – whichever came first. But then something happened that changed everything.

I hadn't seen Lorelei since that first night. But at lunchtime on the fourth day she turned up behind the kitchen counter, dishing out plates full of spaghetti Bolognese. The cooks had been listening to the noon news on the kitchen radio but forgot to turn it off when they raised the hatch grille, so portentous BBC voices competed with the unstoppable sports commentary from the dayroom TV. Scots Gary, numbed sullen by rage, was ahead of me in the queue. He snapped at Lorelei, 'Turn that shite off. D'you think *I* want to know about how fucked up the Middle East is and – what *now* – sodding *dead babies*?'

'I don't suppose you do, Gary,' she said. She handed him a plate and then turned away to switch off the radio. But not before I heard the BBC voice say, '... an arrest was made last night...' The serious tone of the voice thrust,

unwelcome, to the front of my mind what for three peaceful nights, I'd shoved to the back.

When it was my turn I said, 'What dead babies? Who's been arrested?'

'I wasn't really listening, Lady.' She passed me the bowl of grated cheese and I helped myself to a heaped spoonful. I love cheese. 'But there was one of those Social Service scandals about a little kid found concussed and...'

'Was it a boy? In Shoreditch?'

'If it's the same story – but I don't know, honestly, I was concentrating on the sauce. Why?' She gave me a curious, wise-eyed look.

'Nothing.' The man behind jostled me impatiently and I hurried away with my plate to a table at the far end of the room.

I rolled back my sleeve to look at my forearm. Of course it was clean. I'd washed away Li'l Missy's scribbled phone numbers.

'What have I done?' I whispered to Electra. But she didn't answer. She was sitting close to me gazing wistfully at my plate. She loves cheese too. It isn't very good for her, but I took a pinch and offered it to her on the palm of my hand. She accepted quickly.

I stared out of the window. Snow was still clinging stubbornly to the corners of the glass. We were below ground level so I couldn't see much more than passing shoes and ankles behind the iron railings. All was wet, grey and dark. There was no sky. Even when we went outside and looked up there was only a thick layer of loft insulation bearing down on us.

'This is like chokey,' I said to Electra.

'Bollocks,' said one of the guys opposite me and started to tell of food spat and pissed on by the twats on kitchen duty, of canteen dust-ups. Another guy joined in and they swapped memories of brutality and degradation. Does everything have to be a competition between men? Well, maybe not all men. I thought about Li'l Missy and Pierre as they'd been when I first knew them. They'd been kind to each other then. They'd supported each other in their subversion of what was expected of 'normal' men – until Winter Woman started to mould them into the shapes that would satisfy her bourgeois needs. What kind of woman does that? Isn't it usually a *man's* trick – to think only of his own wants and ignore your identity completely?

'That's sexism,' jeered the Sneering Serpent. 'I've told you before – *I* am an equal opportunities tempter. I can find and nurture talent in men and women alike. You should follow my example.'

'Oh belt up,' I said with my mouth full.

'Piss off yourself,' said the guy opposite. 'If you don't like the company just fuck off.'

So I did. I took my plate away to my cocoon. Eating in your room isn't

allowed in Juliet House, but none of the care workers noticed me.

‘What am I supposed to do?’ I asked Electra. She didn’t answer. She hopped up on the narrow bed beside me. She leaned against my shoulder until she’d licked up another mouthful of cheese and I’d stroked her from nose to tail. Then she curled up and closed her eyes.

I thought about Li’l Missy Smister being arrested and sent to prison, having his food peed on and enduring brutality in the canteen. I wasn’t so worried about Pierre – he was big and confident enough to command respect even in a feather boa.

‘In which case,’ interrupted the Disseminator of Doubt, ‘why did he fold and become my love child’s glove puppet?’

‘I don’t know. Something to do with sex? Maybe she *did* infiltrate his life like a parasite, by stealth, and weakened him.’

‘Brilliant at exploiting weakness – my daughter has so many fascinating abilities. You’d never know it to look at her, would you? How does it feel to have such easily manipulated friends?’

‘Unsafe,’ I said.

‘Well then, why risk the safety you’ve discovered here to look for them? What could you do for them if they *have* been arrested?’

I began to be quite glad I’d washed their phone numbers off my arm. I lay down on the bunk and closed my eyes. There was time for a nap before tea. But I’d barely drifted off when I heard the clatter of cutlery on a melamine plate. Electra was obliterating every last trace of spaghetti Bolognese and cheese. The plate looked as if it had been in the dishwasher. But the sight of the pristine plastic made me roll up my other sleeve. And there on my *left* arm was the not quite readable trace of two telephone numbers. Li’l Missy must have written with a Magic Marker. Could I pretend I hadn’t seen it and do a much more thorough job next time I had a shower?

‘That would be *my* advice,’ insinuated Duke Dismal.

‘What should I do?’ I showed Electra the writing. She licked my arm. The faded numbers, unlike cheese, did not disappear.

‘Oh balls and bananas,’ I said. I picked up the shiny plate and left the safety of my pod.

Lorelei was leaving just as I arrived at the kitchen door. She took my plate but said, ‘I’m not washing that up. I’ve done so much in the last hour my hands are melting.’ She looked down at her hands as if they were too big for her and belonged to someone else. She sighed and put my plate on the counter. Then she sighed again and let me into the kitchen while she rinsed my licked plate, knife and fork under the hot tap and put them in the steriliser. The kitchen was very clean. Usually it’s a tip – everyone leaves the washing up for someone

else. But not Lorelei; I knew she'd help me.

I said urgently, 'Get out now, before someone else finds *more* work for you.'

We left the kitchen and this time she shut the door with an air of finality. We walked up the corridor towards the front office together.

I said, 'Can you help me with something?' I pushed my left sleeve up to my elbow and showed her the nearly legible writing. She fished in a bulging carpet bag for her reading glasses.

'Oh dear,' she muttered, squinting and peering. 'Either you wash too well or not well enough.' But she co-opted Rex and his magnifying glass from the front office. They decided there were five possibilities for the two numbers and wrote them down for me. Lorelei then demanded the key to the storeroom and found me a striped, thick-knitted beanie cap and a thick-soled pair of men's shoes. The professionals in the front office looked disapproving but said nothing. They are always polite to their volunteers, but I had a feeling that they relied on Lorelei more than most. Which is why, after some wheedling, they allowed me to use one of the office phones.

The first number earned me abuse: 'Stop calling this number. I haven't got any money. Get an honest job!' At first I thought it was personal but Rex told me that was how he too responded to cold callers. The second didn't connect at all. The third was answered by Li'l Missy.

She started in immediately: 'Momster, where have you been? We need witnesses. Why do you always run out when you're needed? You're such a douche! Honestly, your douchiness would try a saint, so it would.'

I nearly hung up. But after an audible tussle Pierre said, 'Don't mind her, she's panicking.'

'What's happened? Is it Connor?'

There was a pause, and then Pierre said softly, 'He died last night. He never woke up.'

I slid down the wall, doubled over as if I'd been punched in the gut. Oh those bastards, oh shit, shit, shit – the crippling weight we force our poor little children to carry! But they can't. They're too small. They just *can't*.

Why was Connor dead? What had he done to deserve it?

'Nada,' said Pierre. 'He was just a kid.'

'But he was impossible. I sort of wanted to kill him too.'

'Trouble?' Lorelei asked five minutes later as we were walking along the icy pavement to her car. She was tired and picking her way between the treacherous mounds of compacted snow. With the cold pinching her cheeks she looked closer to eighty than seventy. She was older than my mother would have been if she was still alive.

‘What did *I* do?’ I wanted to ask her. ‘What did Connor do to deserve so much abuse? What did *I* do?’ But I didn’t ask. I was alive, and my mother never stubbed out her cigarettes on my body. How could I possibly compare my childhood to Connor’s?

But might Lorelei have given the only sane answer? ‘What could you possibly have done? You were only a child. And besides, you’re conflating two quite different childhoods.’ Then I would’ve shouted, ‘So why do I feel so fucking guilty?’ But there are some muddles even wise old women can’t untangle.

‘But *I* can,’ the Great Guilt Tripper murmured in my ear. ‘Why do you suppose Mommy Dearest always blamed you for your father leaving? Where there’s blame there’s guilt.’

32

Memory

We met in the café we'd gone to when I got out of pokey, where I'd shared a sticky bun with Electra and hadn't realised how dangerously respectable Pierre and Li'l Missy had become. Because respectability *is* dangerous – it has nothing to do with kindness or good faith. All it does is impose its own rigid standards on other people and crush their wonderful anarchic shapes into little square boxes.

The remnants of twice frozen snow stuck to the pavement outside. The steam on the window was thick as a net curtain, and there was a pathetic string of Christmas lights swagged across it, winking randomly.

'When's Christmas?' I asked Electra.

'Don't ask me,' she said, leading me eagerly towards the door. 'I don't think the baby Jesus came to redeem us dogs, do you?'

'What kept you?' Li'l Miss Smister asked. She was wearing aquamarine angora and looking more like her old self.

What kept me was the now unusual task of scraping together enough dosh for half a bottle of red redemption. Did you think I could survive Connor's death without help?

'Oh per-lease,' Electra sighed.

'Not that old excuse again,' yawned the Gravedigger, for once on the same side as my good furry fairy.

Pierre bought me a mug of dark sweet tea and a toasted teacake. He persuaded the woman at the counter to bring a bowl of water and a cold pork sausage for Electra.

'It's serious,' he told me. 'We're waiting for your Kaylee Yost too. We got that Cropper woman sayin' we abused Connor *and* her daughter, and I dunno how many neighbours are backin' her up.'

‘They’re saying I raped a minor,’ Li’l Missy gasped. ‘Me!’

‘The nuns,’ Pierre said. ‘Breathe. Deep breaths. Looks like everyone will believe anything about churchy people these days.’

‘But I wasn’t that sort of nun – I was Audrey Hepburn in *A Nun’s Story*. She wouldn’t hurt a fly.’

‘Yeah,’ Pierre agreed soothingly, ‘nor would Whoopi Goldberg or Julie Andrews, but y’know, ain’t no one understands illusion no more. And, know it, Cherry’s ratted us to the cops that we’re the nuns. Signed an affidavit, or what, to that effect.’

‘So we’re smoked, dried and kippered. You too, worst of all,’ Li’l Missy said to me. ‘Cos it was your idea, you being an ex-con, an’ all, and breaking your parole, and stealing and burglarizing et cetera.’

‘Well,’ Kaylee Yost said, dragging a blast of winter into the café and overhearing the last exchange. ‘The most serious allegations, the ones about the little boy, won’t stand up to any forensic interpretation of the autopsy, provided of course, that you’re telling the truth. But that won’t be for a while yet, and in the meantime things might become quite unpleasant for *all* of you.’

‘We’re tellin’ true,’ Pierre said. He was, in fact, the only one who could carry off sincerity with any hope of belief. And that was because he really was sincere. Li’l Missy and I could never manage it – possibly because the British don’t have a natural talent for self-belief.

Kaylee Yost sat down and asked for coffee. She was dressed as usual in a manly dark business suit, but she still managed to look like a dithery schoolgirl in her sensible waterproof boots, with her lank hair tucked behind her ears. She said now, ‘I’ll need the name of the costumier you hired the nun costumes from, and I hope you kept the receipt too. That will strengthen your story.’

‘Okay,’ said Li’l Missy who never kept receipts. She often didn’t have them in the first place – she’s a bigger thief than I am.

‘The Cropper woman got her dates all wrong,’ Pierre said. ‘Like she’s claiming we had Connor for weeks instead a two days.’

‘That’s what the fancy dress receipts will help to establish.’ Kaylee burned her tongue on the hot coffee and her eyes watered.

‘There’s got to be social work reports or doctors’ records that go back yonks,’ Li’l Missy said. ‘You can’t have that many burns and bruises without *someone* notices.’

‘They’re setting up a Social Service Enquiry,’ Kaylee said. But even someone with her belief in The System didn’t manage to look optimistic about it. The rest of us just sighed. Even Electra.

I said, ‘Well, everyone knows where I was until... um... last week. And at least *I* took him to the hospital.’

All three of them stared at me in surprise. And I realised maybe fleshing out the stages of my relationship with Connor might not help my cause.

‘And who shaved his head?’ Kaylee asked. ‘Mrs Cropper’s making a huge deal about that. Someone shaved his beautiful curls off.’

‘His beautiful curls were filthy with dried shit and infested with nits and lice.’

‘So he was shaved at the hospital? We can verify that, can’t we, that none of you three did it?’

‘I swear none of us did it.’ As far as I was concerned, Kaylee was jumping to a very convenient conclusion.

The other two were looking at me wondering why I didn’t tell our solicitor about Gamma Dora and Mama Misha: Gamma Dora who I’d bet a pound to a penny had been banged up; Misha with her overpowering motherliness and distrust of Social Services; the whole family who ‘didn’t do cops.’ They’d actually paid attention to Connor. They saw his injuries, starvation and lice, and unlike anyone else, they did something about it. They fed him, they washed him, they clothed him. Okay, maybe they were a little free with the cough syrup and alcohol, but for a short time at least, he stopped crying and went to sleep. That was a huge gift to give a little kid like Connor. They didn’t deserve to be sicked on by the Law with all its blundering and blame.

‘You’ll dob them in if you have to,’ said the Sultan of Self-Interest. ‘And you’ll justify it. After all, who’s to say he wasn’t still drugged and confused when he wandered out through that door your friends knocked down. Who’s to say it wasn’t their actions as much as yours that tipped him headfirst down those stone stairs?’

‘We were trying to save him.’

‘Ha-ha-ha. You know what the road to my domain is paved with, don’t you?’

‘Good intentions don’t butter any parsnips in a court of law,’ Kaylee said.

‘Why are we wasting time on who cut Connor’s hair?’ Pierre asked. Something about him had changed. He was wearing an African scarf around his shoulders. It was thick cotton woven in patterns of burnt orange, crimson and gold. Whenever he moved it released the scent of cardamoms, cinnamon and frankincense – the smell of... oh yes, now I recognised it – the smell of Alicia.

‘Mrs Cropper is very good at muddying the waters,’ Kaylee said. ‘Whatever her culpability for her grandson’s condition, it was you three who forced your way into her home, abducted Connor and drove away with him. Someone shaved his head without the permission of his legal guardian. She is throwing everything she can think of into the pot and stirring it.’

‘But we didn’t do it,’ Li’l Missy said.

‘With a better education she might have made an effective and annoying lawyer,’ Kaylee murmured reflectively. ‘She’s absolutely brilliant at misdirection – she’s picking a detail she can prove, however irrelevant it is, and tying up everyone’s time and energy on it. The police, the Social Services, solicitors, me – all up to our ears in the question of who shaved Connor’s head without permission. It’s abuse, et cetera, et cetera – but not hers. She’s innocent as the driven snow.’

This was very bad news for me, Gamma Dora and Mama Misha. I thought maybe I should finish my teacake quickly and go back to Juliet House without leaving a forwarding address. Electra nudged my knee. She said, ‘No, you’re the only protection they have. If you leave now Pierre and Li’l Missy will tell Kaylee about them for sure. They went to Misha’s flat too. They know the address.’ Her breath smelled of cold pork sausage.

I gave her a mouthful of buttered teacake. ‘Yes, but what do I say?’

‘You’ll think of something.’ She lay down, resting her head on my foot, and closed her eyes. I closed my eyes too, but I couldn’t think of anything.

‘Let’s do a timeline,’ Kaylee said, taking a legal pad out of her brief case, dropping a pen and scrabbling under the table for it.

‘Okay,’ I said helpfully. ‘Except I can’t remember dates – my head has bits missing – but the day after I got out of chokey I went to Castle Cropper because Kerrilla Cropper asked me to look in on her little boy, Connor. There was no one there except Connor. He was all alone in his own filth, crying, bruised and skinny as a comb. I saw him through the letterbox. I talked to a neighbour who said she sometimes posted pizza slices through the letterbox for him. I can’t remember... I was going to go back but...’ All I could remember was the thud of trainers into my ribs and the stinging slap on my cheek as my mother said, ‘Shut your mouth, you lying little cow.’

‘I called 999,’ I said, loudly enough to drown her voice.

‘When?’ Kaylee snapped at the end of her biro.

‘You don’t have a phone,’ Li’l Missy pointed out.

‘The underage, you know, girl, who was Connor’s auntie – I took her phone. She grabbed it back, but I told the lady who answered where to find Connor.’ It was a fact about that awful day I’d forgotten till now.

The others stared at me in amazement.

‘Concussion,’ I explained.

‘The call must have been logged,’ Kaylee said, ‘even if it was incomplete.’ But she didn’t sound one hundred percent certain.

‘We don’t talk to strangers about that sort of thing in *my* family,’ my mother said through clenched teeth as she dragged me out from under the bed.

Li'l Missy said, 'She stayed out all that night, didn't she, Pierre? It was the next day we dressed up as nuns and went to see what she told us about. Isn't that right?'

'Sure is.'

'Pierre took a picture,' Li'l Missy told Kaylee eagerly. 'That's dated. That proves Connor was still in Shoreditch two days after Momster's release.'

'It also proves he still had his hair,' Kaylee said, 'and that you were there. And it strengthens Mrs Cropper's assertion that you shaved him.'

I said, 'The phone can't tell anyone *who* took the picture.'

'But...' said Pierre and Li'l Missy together.

'No, stop,' Kaylee interrupted. 'Lady B's right – no one can say who did what unless *you* give them the information. All you have to say is that you're performance artistes. You were dressed as nuns. You witnessed what you took to be a very serious crime – dreadful abuse against a child, and you removed him for his own safety. Don't tell me any more than that.'

'But Cherry's statement...'

'My goodness, Pierre,' Kaylee said, 'Ms Price is a frightfully malicious person. What on earth were you, of all people, doing with a woman like her? And what did you do to make her so vengeful?' She looked at him with warm, wet eyes, and I suddenly realised that she was in love with him, and probably had been since she first met him. Now her face blotched fiery pink and she went on in a rush: 'Provided you don't deny that you were the nuns who took Connor to her house, nothing she has said can implicate you any further. Her main interest is in exonerating herself from any blame whatsoever. The one who should be most worried is you, Lady B.'

'I can't remember,' I said. 'Really I can't. I had concussion. I know I was kicked by kids, and knocked over by a bus, and someone hit me at the hospital. There were cops and a nurse. But I can't remember the sequence or what happened next.'

'There are witnesses,' Pierre said. 'We know she was hit by a bus because we turned up just afterwards and there was a guy who said she saved his life.'

'And the same frigging guy brought Connor to Cherry's house that same night,' Li'l Missy said. 'But who knows what happened in between?' She looked at me meaningfully. I thought, she wants to distance herself from... what? Oh yes – when she and I walked away from the accident to Jade's car, and left Connor all by himself with strangers, howling on the back seat. She wants me to forget about that. Me too, I thought. Oh yes, how many times did I fail to act like a decent, caring human being where Connor was concerned? No, *don't* count the ways.

'I don't know,' I said helplessly. 'I've forgotten.' It was almost true.

Kaylee touched my wrist. 'Try,' she urged, 'try to organise your thoughts.'

'Oh for fuck's sake,' Li'l Missy said. 'Will you look at her – she couldn't organise a prick-up in a brothel. She spent half the time concussed and the other half leathered.'

'But you still managed to take Connor to the hospital?' Pierre asked, hurriedly. 'Can't you remember what happened before that?' He stared at me intently. Willing me to remember or to forget? And then I saw him driving away in the Ambo leaving a cloud of toxic exhaust, and only just avoiding crushing the poor little boy under the Ambo's spinning tyres.

The cops were coming. We both panicked. But, oh, I thought, how many people does it take to kill a child?

'All I remember,' I said, 'is me carrying him on my back to a reception desk but some woman making me take Electra out. No dogs allowed.'

'Which hospital?' Kaylee's pen was hovering over her notebook.

I shrugged helplessly.

'How did you know where to find it?' she persisted. 'Did you go to the main entrance or to A and E?'

'She'd just been hit by a bus,' Li'l Missy said.

'And before you ask,' I said 'the number of the bus was the Number of The Beast.'

'Oh lord,' Kaylee said, resignedly ditching her pen.

Pierre and Li'l Missy Smister both did a wonderful job of making their sighs of relief sound like sighs of exasperation.

'We were just trying to help, honest,' Li'l Missy said.

'I don't doubt it,' Kaylee said sadly.

'It was already too late,' Pierre said.

The Lord of the Bones dug his elbow into my ribs, reciting 'A day late, a dollar short – You'll never do the things you ought – The things you do will come to nought.'

Kaylee said, 'Our interview with the police is tomorrow at three-thirty.'

'*Our* interview?' I said, sitting bolt upright.

Kaylee turned her anxious schoolgirl face towards me. 'I'm afraid so. The police, of course, want to talk to the three of you. These two...' she nodded towards Li'l Missy and Pierre, '... have already made preliminary statements, but you'd left before the officers could take yours.' She sighed. 'Why didn't you call me?' she asked Pierre. 'I could've been there for you.'

'Yeah,' he said. 'We really shoulda. But, know it, I always thought we could deal – I just thought, "We're rescuing a kid. That's a *good* thing, right?" Maybe I thought, y'know, I can't make stuff right with Cherry, but I can do something for the kid. Get him outa the shit-hole he was in. I shoulda known – Social

Services, the law, they got their ways of dealing – but we were, like, goin’ with the moment.’

‘I wish you hadn’t gone with the moment dressed as nuns. That makes it look both frivolous and, well, almost perverted. It makes you an easy target for Mrs Cropper and the media.’

‘Good intentions,’ I said, and heard the Joker sniggering behind my back. ‘Shut *up*,’ I cried, ‘I don’t want to hear again, over and over, what the road to hell is paved with.’

‘Will you shut up about the Devil and hell?’ Li’l Missy said. ‘We’re in this fix cos of you. Just when we need you to help us out your brain goes day tripping.’

‘She’ll get worse if you put pressure on,’ Kaylee said, ‘I’ve seen it happen before.’

‘I’ll corroborate everything Li’l Missy and Pierre say,’ I told Kaylee. ‘They’re right and they haven’t had their brains kicked out, so their memories remain intact. But whatever Sally Spiteful says, I’ll contradict it, deny it and non-corroborate it. She’s a liar.’

‘Sally...?’

‘She talking about Cherry Price.’ Pierre sighed. ‘She thinks Cherry’s the one gave Connor back to his gran’ma. She thinks Cherry already has one kid buried under her shed.’

‘That’s Billy’s story,’ Li’l Missy said gleefully. ‘He’s a pervy old article.’

‘Well...’ Kaylee said, and then stopped.

‘Well, what?’ Pierre fixed her with his warm engaged eyes. Kaylee melted.

‘I really shouldn’t talk about it,’ she said, ‘and you’ve got to promise not to breathe a word.’

‘I promise,’ Pierre said.

‘Not so fast,’ she said. ‘It concerns Ms Price, and you may still have feelings for her...?’ I could see that although she couldn’t bear to ask directly, she was longing for him to answer directly.

‘She’s dead to me,’ he assured her obligingly. ‘Biggest mistake I’ve made in my life so far.’

She sighed, smiled and said, ‘It may not be anything, but while I was waiting for an empty interview room at the police station, I heard a couple of quite senior officers discussing whether or not to take that particular rumour seriously. Apparently Billy isn’t the only neighbour to have suspicions about Ms Price.’

‘Why did you ever get involved with her?’ I cried. ‘There’s a reason why everyone hates her. Why couldn’t you see what was in front of your nose?’

‘Maybe I was lonely that night,’ Pierre said morosely. ‘She put out. It

wasn't supposed to be important.'

'Not important? But you moved *in* with her. You made Li'l Missy, Electra and me into hostages. This wouldn't be half so messy if you hadn't been living in her house.'

'Drop it,' Pierre said sharply. 'It happened and now it's un-happened. Over. Done. Dead.' He turned back to Kaylee. 'So the cops might dig up Cherry's backyard?'

'I don't know. They might.'

'What about the mortgage?' I asked stubbornly.

'What mortgage?' Kaylee asked.

'He was paying her mortgage.'

'In lieu of rent for him, me and Electra,' Li'l Missy said. 'So part of it was her fault for getting sent down and not looking after her own dog.'

'Drop it, both of you.' This obviously was not what Pierre wanted to discuss. Then he softened and said, 'I took your advice about that damn mortgage, Lady B, and I'm off the hook.'

'Lady B gave you financial advice?' Kaylee asked, awestruck. 'And you *took* it?'

Pierre leaned over and patted me on the head with his baseball mitt hand. 'There's a coupla marbles in there.' He grinned at me and I grinned back reluctantly.

I was still furious with him for allowing the Ice Queen to freeze his heart, but he did seem to be regaining some warmth and humour. Maybe it was Alicia. So far she seemed to be a good influence. But how do you trust a guy who's so easily swayed by the woman he's bedding? Tell me that.

But I do respond to approval so I said to Kaylee, 'If Pierre was paying the mortgage on Icy Pants' house, can he be accused of breaking and entering? I mean, if he's sort of legal can't he give me permission to visit and stand beside him while he opens a shed on the property he's paying for?'

'Well, she's claiming she threw him out and he didn't have permission to return. But if she was still accepting *de facto* monthly rent from him she should've given him a month's notice in writing.'

'She was, and she didn't.' Pierre began to look hopeful.

'Of course I was planning to take up exactly this point both with the police and with Ms Price's solicitor,' Kaylee pronounced rather stiffly. 'But you did leave it very late in the day before you rang me.'

'We're sorry,' Li'l Missy said. 'We couldn't believe Cherry'd go through with it.'

'But even if I can get Ms Price to drop charges against you there's still the far more serious matter of Connor Cropper. I need to take detailed statements

from all of you.'

'How can anyone think *we'd* do harm to a little child?' Li'l Missy asked with his most angelic expression pasted to his face.

'Because he was *my* creation,' said the Father of Evil.

'He was forged by cruelty,' I agreed. 'And that made him impossible to love.'

'She better not say *that* to anyone 'cept us,' Pierre said, withdrawing approval.

I thought about Kerry Cropper and her druggie co-parent. Had Connor stood a chance? Ever? Was his fate written in his DNA? I thought about my own mother and father. Was I forged by cruelty too? Is that why I too am impossible to love? How much chance did I ever have?

Electra stirred and nudged my ankle. 'You're still alive,' she whispered sleepily. 'You still have chances because you can make choices.'

'Hah!' sneered the Master of Missed Chances. 'Look at the choices you make! Go on, look.'

'However he was "forged",' Kaylee said, 'a child can never be held responsible for the abuse he suffered – by whomever's hand.'

'Tell that to my mother,' I said, and I put my hand up to touch my swollen, aching left ear and to feel the left side of my jaw where the teeth wobbled. 'She tripped over those enormous feet,' my mother said to her neighbour. 'She's so clumsy.'

'Sit down, please,' Kaylee said. 'We weren't discussing *your* family.'

'Not everything's about you,' Li'l Missy said.

Nothing was about me. It was all about them. They stuck me in the middle. Why me? My brother was exempt. Why? Because he was a boy and more valuable than a younger sister? Perhaps he couldn't be dominated or seduced. Or maybe my father didn't... ? *No stop!* Where is all this coming from?

'I don't know,' Kaylee said. 'But please just sit down and calm down. We really do need you to attend the meeting with the police at Brent Cross.'

'Do we? Really?' Li'l Missy asked. 'She's so batshit crazy she makes me and Pierre look bad too.'

'Write something,' Pierre said to Kaylee. 'Y'know, that sounds like what she's said about... whatever – the Cropper place, her calling 999, the hospital, being kicked, and knocked over by a bus. Crazy enough to sound like her, but not "batshit". Li'l Missy, you help. I'm gonna take her for a little walk. We'll be back.'



He even buttoned up my coat for me – like a *good* father when his daughter's hands are too cold and clumsy to do it for herself. We took Electra. I love Li'l Missy Smister, but the last time she had charge of my gorgeous greyhound he didn't protect her – the opposite in fact. I may be crazy but that doesn't mean I make the same mistake twice.

'Quite,' agreed Milord, 'you make it fifty times. Or you create brand new ones.'

'Don't be so goddam hard on yourself,' Pierre said, as we slipped and slithered over patches of compacted snow. 'And don't be so goddam hard on Li'l Missy neither. Sure, she ain't great under pressure. But who is? I reckon we all lost a piece of our souls over Cherry and Connor.'

'I did.' I nodded vehemently. 'I couldn't cope. I was so sorry for myself just about all the time, I couldn't even feel sorry for him.'

'And now he's dead,' crowed the Collector of Skulls.

'And now he's dead.' Pierre shook his head ruefully. 'We fucked up. It's that simple. Same with Cherry – I fucked up. Connor paid. You paid. Electra paid. But what am I gonna do? Spend the rest of my life beating myself up?'

'That'd be a start,' I said, because that was what Satan was saying to me as he dug his bony fingers into my heart.

'What Alicia says,' Pierre began as if he hadn't heard me – which he probably hadn't because it's the logical consequence of not listening. 'She says it's what you do next that counts.'

Maybe what I could do next might be to have a proper big drink and forget all the dreadful crap I'd done, and all the good I hadn't done, and all the damage that had been done to me. I know what works.

There was a prowling monster of a memory trying to escape, trying to fight its way out of the back of my mind. I didn't want it. I wanted to get rid of it the way I'd managed to get rid of abused Baby Connor. I'd left Connor for the last time, crying in a wrecked car. I turned my back and walked away. Could anything be as bad as that? But there *was* something. Buried under the rubble in the ruined back left-hand corner of my mind, something was trying to claw its way up to the light.

'Let me remind you,' murmured the Lord of Lost Memory. 'You were seven years-old, and...'

'Shut up, shut up, shut up.' I covered my ears, and started to run.

'Slow down,' Pierre said, clamping his dinner plate hand round my arm. 'You can't run away. It won't work, know it. What if you fell on the ice and broke a leg? What would happen to Electra?'

'You'd give her to Madam Absolute Zero of Antarctica. She'd be chained up in a shed. She could be dead now, Pierre, of hypothermia, all because you

chose to hump Frieda Frigidaire. All because I went to the lockup. All because I fell in love with the Caliph of Contempt. And Connor? What happened to him? Found at the bottom of those filthy concrete stairs. All because poor Gorilla Crapper had bareback sex with her Demon Drug Lord

‘What you saying, girl?’ Pierre shrugged impatiently. ‘That bad stuff happens when you pick your lovers wrong? Well, no shit! Lovers don’t come with reviews tattooed to their butts. You gotta suck it and see. Then move on if you don’t like the taste.’

‘Like *you* did?’ I cried.

‘Why’re you so obsessy ’bout this? Why don’t *you* just move on?’

We glared at each other in mutual misunderstanding.

Pierre pointed his huge forefinger straight between my eyes. ‘What Alicia says is, “You try, you fail, you start again.” Why can’t you do that?’

‘Because I’ve got a *memory*,’ I yelled at him. ‘I’ve got voices whispering in my head.’

‘So why do they only whisper about crap and hellfire? And why do you fuckin’ listen to them?’

‘I don’t whisper about crap and hellfire,’ Electra retorted huffily, turning away from an interesting bollard.

‘You’re right – you don’t.’ I stopped and crouched, taking her beautiful slim face in my hands. ‘You always try to put me straight.’ I looked up at Pierre. ‘Maybe Alicia’s your Electra. If so, you’re a very lucky guy.’

‘I dunno how she’d feel, you comparing her to a bitch.’ His face relaxed into a rueful grin.

‘Proud,’ I said.

‘At least I don’t have to be sauced to talk to her. See, Lady B, we got a problem. If you stick around you’ll be back in the slammer by Tuesday. Kaylee seems to think we need your story. But I dunno – could be I learned something – like, it ain’t right to sacrifice you and your pooch for my safety.’

‘What about Li’l Missy?’

‘Nother story.’

‘Run,’ advised my Ignoble Lord. ‘He’s going to ask you to sacrifice yourself for Li’l Missy.’

‘See, I think Kaylee’s right – in the long run that forensic shit’s going to get us off the hook: Connor was tortured long time. It couldn’ta been us. But, what with Cherry putting the boot in, *you’ve* been set up for a take-down. Li’l Missy too. So, gettit, I’m saying you two should blow till they arrest Mrs C and her boyfriend. Cos you’re right, they’ll iron you out just for being you. And Li’l Missy, she can’t afford too much looking at neither.’

‘Yeah but,’ I began, ‘what about your work permit? Madam Jaws’n’Claws

just happened to mention that to the cops. You won't stand up to scrutiny either. The Baron of Betrayal seduced you into trusting Prissy Pricey with dangerous information. Her words will ramify. The past stains the present *and* the future with its blood.'

'Shee-it.'

'Alicia says move on, okay, but where to? Back to the States? Deported?'

'I'll talk to Kaylee. She can find me an immigration lawyer.'

'Danger. The love weevil crawled into her heart. It's begun feasting.'

'Say what?'

'Are you blind? Kaylee's soft on you. Handle with care.'

'Now you're flipping out for real.'

I stared into his kindly, unseeing eyes.

'Gimme a break,' he said.

'Don't you notice anything except what you *want* to see? You don't want Miss Malice to be malicious so you don't notice her spite and manipulations. You don't want poor Kaylee at all except as a useful lawyer so you don't notice her as a woman, how she's feeling about you. Sometimes I could slap you, Pierre.'

'What you raving about, woman? All I'm saying is you and Li'l Missy should do a flit. I'm trying to take care of business for you. It really don't need to be that complicated.'

'And I'm saying maybe we all should do a flit.'

'I can't leave London just now. I'm starting that paramedic course in a coupla weeks.'

'You've just moved from one woman to another without even coming up for air. One day Cherrynobyl slings you and your gowns and wigs out into the rain, but by the early hours of the very next morning you've fallen hook, line and sinker for the first woman to cross your path. You don't think that's going to make Ms Nuclear Fallout just a tiny bit vengeful towards you?'

'I can handle Cherry.'

'You are the most self-deluding twommit I ever met.'

We stared at each other again and then, without speaking, continued slowly and carefully along the frozen, nearly deserted street. Walking soothed me. Pierre stuck his huge hands in his pockets, hunching his shoulders, trying to bury his ears in his gorgeous scarf. His Alicia scarf. He might as well bury his head.

What can it possibly be like to be so lovable? Every day of my life has taught me what it's like not to be.

'It's got sod-all to do with love,' I told Electra, tortured by envy. 'A woman wants a boyfriend. She doesn't care who. A man wants a fuck. He doesn't care

who.'

'But Pierre is lovable,' she told me.

Pierre just stared at me and said, 'I never knew you were so sexist or so cynical.'

Misquoting my Mean Master, I said, 'I'm an equal opportunities sexist cynic. But Electra's right, you are quite lovable.'

'Well, all right,' he said. 'Got that cleared up, then.'

'But are you loving?'

'Sure,' he said with easy confidence. He certainly thought he knew the right answer.

'Did you love Cherry?' There was no right answer to that one, and he knew it. He looked stumped.

Eventually he said, 'There isn't just one sort of love.'

I gave him a contemptuous glare and let him stew. We walked. I waited.

Then he said, exasperated, 'Wha'd'ya want me to say? If I say "no" I'm a bastard, and if I say "yes" I'm a jerk.'

'Why do you need *my* approval?' I asked. 'I'm batshit crazy, remember? Why did you need Cherry's approval? She's mean-spirited, spiteful and predatory.'

'Why're you so goddam stuck on that? We got a whole nother situation – Connor, Connor's lying sow of a grandma, and the cops.'

'Because, Pierre, we're all in big bother. But you're going to send Li'l Missy and me away to safety and sacrifice yourself. What for? So you can have sex with a woman you only just met? Look at the shit you got us all in because you had sex with Miss Perfect Ice Storm for no better reason than she "put out." You think your shag-life affects only you, huh? But there have been consequences. To Li'l Missy, to me, to Electra. And Connor. Connor's dead because...'

'Connor's dead cos everyone fucked up. Everyone.'

'Yeah, I know, but take Cruella out of the picture, Pierre. Replace her with someone kind, who cared more for kids than carpets.'

'Like Alicia? Are you saying there'd of been a different scene? That's crazy for sure. You can't just rewrite history.'

'You could,' I said, beginning to cry.

Pierre said, 'Why are you so stuck and obsessive?'

'I don't *know*.' He was right: Cherry was a worm caught in my brain, eating me up, till nothing existed but her smug, self-righteous smile. I wanted Pierre to make her un-happen for me as easily as he had for himself. Yes, I wanted him to rewrite history for me.

Because if my father hadn't done what he did and my mother hadn't

caught him – us... me – I would have been a completely different person. Wouldn't I? Well, wouldn't I? It wasn't all written in the stars by Satan's hand. Was it?

'Wasn't it?' the Lord of All Shame asked. 'Do you really think that what I write can be un-written?'

'Don't cry,' Pierre said, walking closer to me so that our elbows bumped. 'You did your best.'

'No I didn't.' And I realised that I still wasn't. Because I wasn't crying for Connor as Pierre thought – I was crying for myself. Why? Why was the wrecking-ball of memory crashing into me now, and demolishing my already uninhabitable house? *Now* – when someone else deserved my tears far more than I did.

'Oh goody,' said Mr Mnemonic. 'Keep it up. Between us we can show them what batshit crazy really looks like. You were a dirty girl and an evil child. Just like Connor. Your shoes didn't shine, you had grime under your fingernails.'

I pulled my glove off. There were filthy little crescents under my fingernails.

'See? You haven't changed a lick.'

'Stop that!' Pierre shouted. He bent, hauled me to my feet and tried to brush the snow off my hands. 'Put your gloves back on. If you wanna wash your filthy mitts, use soap and hot water.' He rubbed my hands fiercely against his coat. 'You'll give yourself frostbite. What freakin' good will that do anyone?'

'I didn't do anything,' I wept.

'None of us did anything.'

'I didn't *do* anything,' I said when my mother hit my face so hard my teeth wobbled. I have hardly any teeth at all now. Did she knock them all out? So long ago.

'It's not your fault,' Pierre said, 'any more than it's anybody else's.'

'Remember,' whispered Mr Memory McNasty. 'It's all there, waiting.'

'This is not what it looks like,' my father said when the light, shockingly, went on in my mean little bedroom.

'You and me weren't even in the house when the cops came and took Connor away.'

'But I watched.' And I watched my father walk out of the house forever with his clumsy suitcase banging against his legs. He didn't cry or scream. 'Don't tell your mother,' he said. He always said that. And I didn't. But I should have told somebody. Not her. Oh no. Never *her*. She grabbed Connor by the straps of his dungarees and threw him out like garbage to be beaten, burnt and

chucked down the stairwell. Like, yes, garbage.

‘Stop,’ Pierre shouted, grabbing my hands again. ‘What’re you *doing*? How’s hitting yourself in the face gonna undo any shitty thing?’ He wiped the blood off my nose with the collar of my anorak.

He didn’t understand at all, but he seemed to sense that I needed something from him. So he said, ‘Okay, yeah, I never loved Cherry. She was kinda boring. But she, yeah, put out, and she had a house. It seemed like a good idea at the time – somewhere for Li’l Missy and Electra to stay. A pull-in for the Ambo. It wasn’t meant to be forever. Or important. Or that “love” shit. And I thought... I can get outa this whenever I want. But I couldn’t. Everything turned into a fuckin’ negotiation, a battle.

‘She was, oh I dunno, like a gang boss exacting tribute. But in little steps. Like I asked for a cuppa coffee, I got a cuppa coffee. But I had to do the dishes. And after I did the dishes just once, I had to do them every fuckin’ night. It was my job from then on. So I stopped asking for coffee. But the dishes were still my job. Like the freakin’ mortgage.

‘And then when I went out, y’know, to a club with Li’l Missy, she’d begin to say stuff like, “This house is too crowded”, or “That dog’s making a mess in my garden,” just tellin’ me, y’know, she could pull the plug on us any time she chose. So I cut down on goin’ out. But that didn’t stop the threats. But they weren’t real threats. They were, like, reminders that we were dependent on her.

‘And y’know what you said about you, Li’l Missy and Electra being used as hostages? Well, that’s a gang boss technique too – “Do this or I’ll put your little sister on the streets.” You could stay in the Ambo but I had to make you take the meds *she* wanted you to take. You could stay an extra coupla nights, but I had to take her to New York. I was always paying out for something. I dunno how it started, and I never saw it comin’.

‘And then, when she didn’t get her way, she chunked us all out a high window. And I never saw that comin’ neither. There never seemed to be anything I could righteously call her on. Nothin’ she couldn’t deny. Never. Until you came along and called her cold and – what’s your word – coercive? I didn’t see it. I always saw her as small and weak. Was I ever wrong about that! Maybe, yeah, it was cos of the sex. But, know it, even that was, y’know, boring.

‘Yeah,’ he said ruefully. ‘And now there’s Alicia, all big and warm, and liking me for myself. And, know it, she’s got a lovely big mouth, not just a thin slash in her face to smear the lipstick on. And a generous ass. Big mouth, big ass – my kinda woman.’

‘Now who’s being sexist?’ I said. But I was feeling better.

‘So how come you could see the coldness and coercion, but I couldn’t?’

‘I wasn’t humping her,’ I said, making him wince. ‘And she... she... ’ She what? And then it came in a lump, like an anvil dropped on my head: ‘I recognised her. She’s my mother. I mean, she reminded me of my mother.’

‘Really?’ he said absently. ‘Tough shit.’

You’ll never know how tough shit was in our house, Mr Lovable Pierre. But Electra had been listening. She pressed her shoulder against my leg, looked up at me and gave that affectionate sound somewhere between a grunt and a whimper.

‘She’s shivering,’ said knows-nothing-sees-nothing Pierre. ‘Let’s go back.’

33

Maybe It's People Power

By the time we got back to the café, Kaylee had gone.

'Where were you?' Li'l Missy was fed up. She eyed my snotty, blood-stained sleeve and tear-stained cheeks. 'Another "episode"?' she asked waspishly. 'No, don't tell me, I don't want to know. Kaylee wrote out a slightly less deranged version of what you remember. I forged your signature while our brilliant but prudish legal advisor was having a wee. She's obsessive-compulsive about the rules. Boring!'

'I can't go to a police interview,' I said.

'Nor can I,' she said. 'I'm going to Bristol whether you're coming or not. My darling endocrinologist says there's a really active trans scene there and he's got a friend who'll help me out. And I've got a mate who's a drag party organiser. Remember Hot Heather Hott, Pierre? She says there's loads of work for compères and strippers for hen and stag parties. I could be the belle of the ball in Bristol. You could be too, Pierre.'

I said, 'He thinks he's bombproof.'

Li'l Missy said, 'I think he's pussy-pulled.'

Pierre said, 'I think you should both butt out.'

Duke Dissention said, 'I think you should all go your own ways and let my boys in blue pick you off one at a time.'

Electra said nothing at all. She laid her sweet head on my shoe and went to sleep. I needed a drink. If I left now I could get one and be back at the hostel by suppertime. I was pretty safe there. Not even Pierre, Li'l Missy or Kaylee knew where I was, so they couldn't sick the cops on me. Kaylee had my statement. What more could anyone ask?

'Are you brain damaged?' my mother asked in the sweet, reasonable tone she used to disguise her most hurtful insults.

‘Just an imbecile,’ Satan purred. ‘She’s forgotten she phoned the pervert’s mobile from the hostel landline and the number will be lodged in his phone.’

‘She was always slow,’ my mother agreed. ‘She doesn’t understand modern life at all.’

‘I can get to her any time I want. And so can you, Mother.’

‘And so can the police.’ My mother laughed. ‘The pervert will give her up the moment he’s put under pressure. Safe? With friends like that? She has absolutely no judgement whatsoever.’

‘How would we get to Bristol?’ I asked Li’l Missy. ‘Can you fix the Ambo?’ I asked Pierre.

‘Dunno,’ they both said.

‘I got it towed to the shop,’ Pierre said. ‘It looks pretty much fucked to me. But I’ll see. You’ll need something. Li’l Missy got homies to crash with; you ain’t.’

‘You got friends there too,’ Li’l Missy said, ‘and a job.’

Pierre sighed. ‘You don’t geddit, Missy. You never get it. I’m not a drag queen. Sure I perform on the circuit, but seriously, pal, I’m a motor mechanic.’

‘You’re way more than that,’ Li’l Missy protested. ‘Okay, Cherry scared you off, and now you’re gun-shy about the whole identity bit cos you got a new shag. But don’t diminish yourself.’

‘See, I got a chance,’ he said, ‘to move on, train for something else. First aid. Paramedic. Ambulances. Alicia thinks I got a talent for it.’

‘You’ve got a chance to be pulled in by the cops,’ Li’l Missy said. And I could see he cared and was scared for Pierre. ‘You’ve got a chance to be all snarled up with the death of an abused kiddy.’

‘You’ve got a chance to be deported.’ I wanted to get my tuppence-worth in too. ‘Illegal immigrant, Pierre, working without a work permit. You know how paranoid everyone is about foreigners. Our Evil Lord’s really scorching the earth with that one.’

‘Okay, okay.’ He hunched up shoulders as if, suddenly, they weighed a ton. ‘I’ll talk to Kaylee and I’ll talk to Alicia. Now let it go.’

‘He thinks he’s the strong one,’ Satan tittered.

‘You think you’re the strong one,’ I said. ‘But you could be the most vulnerable of all.’

‘Hey!’ Li’l Missy protested. ‘He is the strong one.’

‘That’s what Master Misconception wants you to think. He’s trying to pick us all off, one by one.’

‘Here’s what we do,’ said the strong one. ‘We take off back to Billy’s. Yeah, you too, Lady B.’

‘Fuck off,’ I said.

‘Language!’ admonished my mother. ‘Wash your mouth out with soap. What a dirty girl you are! Dirty, dirty, dirty liar!’

I scrambled to my feet. I had to get out – run as far from my mother as I could. What would she say next? What would she remind me of? Accuse me of?

‘Wait,’ Pierre said, grabbing my wrist. ‘We’ll go to a bar first. A small glass of red, yeah? Maybe two, if you’re good.’

‘You’re always doing something *I’m* going to regret,’ Li’l Missy said. ‘It’s called enabling.’

‘It’s called practical,’ Pierre retorted. ‘Look at her.’

‘Do I have to?’ Li’l Missy shuddered. Pierre took my arm, Li’l Missy took his and we drifted away towards salvation – otherwise known as the King William, only half a mile from Billy’s house. And Troll Territory. Lured by the promise of a glass or two. When will I ever learn?



‘I recognise the smell,’ Electra said, after Pierre had parked the car and we were walking towards Billy’s house in the dusk. ‘I associated it with food and comfort to begin with. But later, I remember, there was a near-death experience involving a lawnmower.’ She shivered delicately. I stooped to adjust her two coats. She was right – the closer we came to Cherry’s house, the lower the temperature dropped. Leaving the car, we’d been met by a slicing, dicing wind fresh from the Arctic Circle.

I stopped. ‘Why am I doing this?’ I asked Electra.

‘United we stand,’ she said. ‘Divided we’re in serious kak.’

‘I told you,’ Pierre said. ‘I’ve been charging up my old cell phone for you. I forgot to bring it out. You gotta stay in contact with Li’l Missy.’

He’d never even mentioned it. I was about to say so when Electra put in, ‘After the offer of a glass of wine, you stopped listening.’ Which might have been true.

We turned into Polar Price’s road and stopped dead.

There were three police cars and one large van in front of Cherry’s house. Without a word we turned and retreated round the corner. Li’l Missy took his phone out of his tiny bag and thumbed a number. ‘Billy,’ he breathed to Pierre.

We waited. ‘Billy’s sweet on Li’l Missy,’ Pierre whispered. ‘Know what – that twisted bastard gives perverts and racists a bad name. I can’t stand the guy, and he can’t stand me. The only reason he’s letting me stay is...’ and he jerked his thumb at Li’l Missy who was talking in excited girly tones into his phone. ‘You won’t believe how hard it is to find a decent place to rent in

London these days.’ He must’ve caught my expression, because he added, ‘Sorry, I got succotash for brains.’

Li’l Missy blacked out his screen and said, ‘We got to get to Billy’s. He says they’re knocking down Cherry’s shed and digging up her garden. We’ve so-o got to see this.’

‘Digging up her... ?’ Pierre was astonished. ‘The cops? I thought that was just, like, slander. What the hell are they looking for?’

‘It’s what everyone’s been saying about her ex-husband’s kid.’

‘But that’s just rumour.’ Pierre rubbed his face. ‘The neighbours must be making it up outa spite. I dunno why the cops’d take it serious.’

The neighbours were shivering in a tight little group on the other side of the road. It was too cold for the kind of street party they’d enjoyed before. It was too cold for us as well. We walked the long way round to Billy’s house.

‘Was she even married?’ Pierre asked no one in particular. I could see he was disturbed by how little he knew about the woman into whose frosty fist he’d placed all our fates.

How little we know about those we fall for. I knew nothing about my cruel Lord’s cruel son when I gave him my heart, body and bank details. Nothing but that he was younger and lovelier than a woman like me could ever have deserved. And the extraordinary heart-stopping fact that he saw something special in me. Of course everything I thought I knew was brutally contradicted. There will always be a part of me which recognises that I got what my mother’s dirty, stupid, clumsy daughter had coming.

I touched Pierre’s arm sympathetically. But Pierre was securely lovable – up to a point. He said, ‘And even if she was married to the guy, he’s still alive, isn’t he? And the mother. Their boy couldn’t just go missing and be killed without anyone making a fuss.’

‘The guy was sectioned,’ I said. ‘He’s in a secure wing somewhere.’

‘What about the kid’s mom?’

‘Dunno,’ I said. ‘Billy didn’t say. But your Miss Permafrost stole her husband and her home. So maybe she went crazy too and topped herself. Or took to crime and ended up in chokey with no one but a cruel abusive stepmother, who shall be nameless, to look after her little boy.’

‘We ain’t talking about Connor here,’ Pierre reminded me gently.

Suddenly I remembered Connor’s mum, Kerrilla Cropper, in jail, unprotected from the Hard Corps of women who taunted and belittled her for her shape and illiteracy. Had someone told her about *her* little boy? The last time I saw her she was naked, blue with cold, crazy with rage and grief, being dragged away to solitary. I’d cheered her on even though she’d left me to clear up the mess she made by blocking all the bogs with her clothes.

Connor's mother – probably deemed, by whoever thought they knew best, to be inadequate to look after him. Whereas it was they who were inadequate to make decisions on her behalf. They knew worst. Look what happened! Go on, just look, if you dare.

‘Look at what, wackadoodle?’ Li'l Missy asked.

‘Hush,’ said Electra.

‘We're nearly there.’ Pierre picked up the pace. ‘Keep it together till we know what's going down.’

Miraculously we did keep it together and managed to enter Billy's house unseen.

We tiptoed through to the kitchen and straight out the back door, picking up three kitchen chairs as we went to spy over the garden fence.

The shed, Electra's prison, had been taken down and was propped like a flat-pack against the fence. The police had begun to erect a tent over the concrete plinth while a man in white coveralls was breaking it up with a road drill. They seemed to have complete access to the garden both from the house and from the side gate. There was no sign of Cherry or her lawyer.

It was too cold to stay outside so we moved back into the kitchen – where we found Tantie heating up what looked like a pan full of *boeuf bourguignon*.

‘You're still here,’ I said in surprise. She kissed me on both cheeks by way of reply. She seemed so pleased to see me that I gulped back a sob of gratitude. No one except Electra was ever pleased to see me.

‘Ticket 'ome, two weeks,’ she said. ‘I cook for 'orrible Billy. I sleep warm.’

I sniffed the rich stew. ‘You cook beautifully,’ I said.

‘Of course,’ she said, with a disdainful glance at the mountains of canned food on Billy's shelves.

Pierre said, ‘I can't believe the cops're taking this serious. Cherry may be stone cold-hearted but she never actually killed no one.’

‘Maybe it's people power,’ Li'l Missy said. ‘Maybe too many people kicked off too big a buzz. Maybe the media got involved. It's all PR and numbers with the police these days.’

‘Where's my supper?’ Billy yelled down the stairs. ‘I want my supper and I want Missy to bring it. I heard you come in.’

‘If my hands were big enough I'd like to strangle him. If I could even find his neck. I know it's somewhere under his ears but...’ Li'l Missy took the tray Tantie was holding out to her and waited while she filled a tall glass with lager. Reluctantly she took Billy's supper upstairs.

I could smell red wine in the *boeuf bourguignon*. Maybe there was some left.

‘Maybe there's some beef left too,’ said Electra, whose nose was a hundred times more sensitive than mine, and whose priorities were quite different. She

padded purposefully towards the waste bin. Tantie anticipated her and liberated all the beef trimmings plus a couple of chunks of the gorgeous-smelling stew.

Would I be invited to supper? Having put up a fight against coming to Billy's house in the first place, I now didn't want to leave unfed, go back to Juliet House where I'd have to protect my plate from thieves and sleep in a coffin-sized pod smaller than my cell in chokey. Apart from Billy himself, everyone I loved was in Billy's house.

'Before you go,' Pierre said, 'I'm giving you my old phone. I've set it up for you. Li'l Missy and my numbers are on speed dial and I'll show you how to use it. All you gotta do is keep it charged. We can't have you swanning around free-range.' He went away to the living room and came back with a little gadget and the charger.

'Don't,' I said. 'If it isn't stolen by the end of the week, chances are I'll sell it for booze.'

'Fat chance,' Li'l Missy said, coming back with an empty tray and looking at it with contempt. 'Even a lobotomized thief wouldn't rob a moby that old, and you couldn't sell it in a third world slum. If you want to get rid of it you'll have to drop it off a motorway bridge.'

'Hey!' Pierre protested. 'It ain't pretty, but it works.' Ignoring Missy, he showed me how to call his number on the dainty gizmo that seemed to be too small for my swollen, neglected thumbs. While he was doing that, I noticed that Tantie was setting places for five at the kitchen table. Surely one of those places could be mine. I tried to concentrate on what Pierre was saying but his voice seemed to be drowned out by the rumbling of my stomach. I was saved when he leaped up to open the front door to Alicia.

I heard her voice from the hall saying, 'What's going on next door?' but I couldn't hear his reply because it sounded as if he was kissing her and trying to talk at the same time.

She came into the kitchen sniffing the air and giving Tantie an enthusiastic thumbs up. 'Hello,' she said to me, accepting and unsurprised. The room vibrated with affection. Electra woke from her beef-induced doze and went over to be included.

Li'l Missy said. 'They've finished putting the tent up – you can't see anything except light. Oh hi, Ali. Has Pierre told you what's going on? Billy says he wants you to go up and listen to his chest after supper. He's been leaning out of an open window, spying on next door, and he thinks he's caught pneumonia.' I could see that Alicia too was paying rent for Pierre. She sighed, grinned, and said, 'Okay,' in a resigned, humorous tone.

Tantie put the pan on the table with a ladle so we could all help ourselves.

She'd made a big bowl of mashed potato too. Nobody questioned my presence.

'Friends,' Electra murmured softly, and yawned. 'Relax. Don't spoil it.'

So I sat and ate with my friends. A commonplace, banal sentence, but an almost unique event in my experience. Pierre and Alicia sat so close they seemed to be joined at ankle, knee, thigh, hip, elbow and shoulder. Sometimes Alicia ate left-handed so they could twine fingers under the table. I'd never had a love like that – love that wasn't wrecked by my fear of losing it, love that wasn't destroyed by pretence and manipulation. I swallowed fragrant gravy and sour jealousy in equal measure. I had prayed for years for a powerful, simple, equal love to rescue me from my mother's blame-filled house. Instead my Demon Daddy Lord sent me a snake whose name was Perfidy – well, Graham, actually – and broke me into smithereens. I haven't found all the pieces yet. They could be anywhere, even under *your* toenails.

'No Demon Lords at dinner,' Li'l Missy said, tapping on the table to get my attention.

'Or toenails,' Tantie added, and gave me an extra helping of stew and mash.

'She doesn't sound so whack with her mouth full,' Pierre informed Alicia.

'Nor do you,' she replied sweetly, digging him in the ribs, making him laugh.

'Where's my pudding,' Billy howled from on high, breaking the mood. Tantie took a dish of *crème brûlée* out of the fridge, filled a bowl and took it upstairs herself. I blinked in astonishment.

'How does she get Billy to pay for all this?' I asked.

Li'l Missy started to laugh. 'She put up with chicken soup and rice pudding for barely one day, then she stormed upstairs to protest. Billy kicked her out. So what did she do? She trolled on down to the shopping centre and started busking. I went with her for a laugh. But, know what? She's got a voice like, oh I dunno, one of those '60s people, um, Joni Mitchell? And before I could say "get up to date already", she had a hatful of money. She's something else, is Tantie.'

'Back she came,' Pierre said, 'paying no never mind to Billy evicting her, and we've been eating like CEOs of Global Corporate Greed ever since.'

'And, natch, there's not been a single peep out of Billyboy.'

'She's an inspiration,' Alicia said. 'I'd like to have that kind of jazz when I'm her age.'

Politely, everyone avoided looking at me, who had as much jazz, earning power and culinary talent as a cardboard box.

Tantie came downstairs with Billy's dirty dishes. She said, 'They find something. Something happening.'

‘You’re *shitting* us!’ Pierre said, leaping to his feet, breaking the warm, sustaining contact with Alicia. ‘What?’ He made for the front door.

Li’l Missy leaped up too. ‘No!’ He grabbed Pierre’s arm. ‘You can’t go out. There’s bloody cops everywhere.’

‘Are you worried about Sister Sour?’ I asked, trying to hide my own bitterness.

He ignored me. ‘It’s all a mistake. Someone fucked up. It can’t be happening.’

‘Are you worried about Cherry?’ Alicia had not ignored me.

‘No,’ he said emphatically. Then, ‘Yes.’ He suddenly looked about twelve years-old and utterly bewildered. ‘Okay, so now I know stuff about her I never thought possible back in the day.’ He was talking about her as if his affair was centuries past. ‘But we were *living* with her. How could we be that wrong about a woman – an ordinary, boring woman?’

‘Maybe nobody’s ordinary and boring,’ Alicia said gently.

I said, ‘Maybe you, being ordinary boring men, didn’t listen to her, or even look at her properly.’

‘Oy!’ Li’l Missy yelled at me. ‘Take that back. I’m not a man, and I’ve never been ordinary.’

‘Nor me,’ said Electra.

‘*Peut-être*,’ Tantie put in, ‘she a very good liar.’

‘Yeah,’ Pierre said, looking relieved. ‘How could *anyone* have known?’

‘I’m totally a feminist,’ Alicia said. ‘But I got to admit that women can be horrible and dangerous. Look at poor little Connor’s grandmother. Poverty and ignorance do terrible things to people. You can’t last a day in my job without taking that on board along with the defibrillators.’

‘Miss Frosty wasn’t poor or ignorant.’ I just couldn’t let Pierre off the hook. I don’t know why. I like Pierre a lot, but his wilful blindness about Cherry still stuck in my gullet like a hardboiled egg. ‘She was the Devil’s daughter and anyone who wasn’t shagging her could see it. Ask Billy. Ask the neighbours.’

‘Let it go,’ Alicia said, with a gentle hand on mine. ‘We all make dreadful mistakes.’

‘Amen,’ said Tantie.

‘And one of the most humungous was made by you,’ Li’l Missy pointed out with relish.

‘Got you there,’ said Electra. ‘Ask yourself how come you couldn’t see how malevolent the Satan’s Son was?’ She was loving and forgiving but inconveniently truthful.

‘But I was in *love* with him,’ I protested. ‘Of course I couldn’t “see” him. Pierre doesn’t even have that excuse.’

‘Yeah, I really don’t,’ Pierre agreed, mainly for Alicia’s benefit. ‘But why’re you so goddam pissed with me?’

I didn’t know, so I ignored the question. ‘What if she does need help?’

‘She can afford it herself,’ Li’l Missy said. ‘Pierre was paying her mortgage for fricking months. And doing the weekly shop. And taking on three-quarters of the utilities. She was a greedy mare – I always said so.’

‘You so did not,’ Pierre told him angrily.

We were saved from a fight by a sharp knock on the door.

‘Cops!’ Li’l Missy turned pale.

‘I’ll go,’ Alicia said. ‘You guys keep it down or I’ll turn you all in.’ She smiled her flashing warmth around the table and left, firmly closing the kitchen door behind her.

Moments later she was back with little Ziggy who was bouncing up and down with excitement and unspent energy. He said, ‘You gotta watch the telly. We’re on telly. Mum says watch Eye On London.’

Alicia said, ‘She posted the video she shot of poor little Connor being kicked out of next door on Facebook and YouTube. Connor’s still hot news so apparently one of the news feeds bought it.’

Everyone got up and started for the stairs. Billy’s was the only TV in the house.

‘I’m getting a Playstation, Mum says...’ Ziggy began. Then he saw Electra and she got up and went to him, waving hello. ‘She’s better,’ he said happily.

‘She’s saying thank you for the food you brought her when she was chained up,’ I told him.

‘My Scruff came from a shelter,’ he said, stroking her shoulders. ‘I want to rescue lots of dogs when I’m older.’

‘You made a good start already,’ Electra said.

‘She says you’ve already made a good start.’

‘Yes I did.’ He grinned at Electra who grinned back. ‘My mum says I got to go straight home.’ He gave Electra one last pat and skipped away out of the front door.

I should’ve followed the others upstairs, but instead I took a sneaky peek in the fridge. And, hallelujah, there was a bottle of red, a third full. Silently thanking Tantie for making proper *boeuf bourguignon* I swallowed just two mouthfuls quite slowly, and then went up to Billy’s bedroom.

Four of us stood behind Billy’s reinforced sofa and watched professional footage of the police in white overalls carrying a body bag out of the tent in Cherry’s back garden, through the side gate and loading it into an unmarked van waiting on the gravel pull-in.

‘I told you,’ Billy crowed. ‘Didn’t I tell you? I was right all along.’ He

sounded as amazed and triumphant as if a long shot had won him a fortune at Epsom.

‘That’s live footage,’ Li’l Missy said. She had a front row seat next to Billy. Billy had his hand on her knee. ‘Look at the lights.’

It was true – while we’d been eating in the kitchen an outside broadcast team had turned up. We watched open-mouthed as the cops slammed the back doors of the van and stepped away while it U-turned and sped off down the road. The picture changed to show a reporter standing outside Cherry’s front door. She was wearing a sheepskin coat and hat but even so her pretty face was pinched with cold.

‘An ordinary house in an ordinary North London suburban street where, in the last hour, extraordinary events have taken place. Just a few hours ago a full forensic team was deployed, a garden shed was demolished and, it seems, the remains of a body has been found under the concrete foundations.’

‘It’s poor old Steve’s little boy,’ Billy said. ‘Didn’t I tell you?’

‘I don’t believe it,’ Pierre said, his voice rasping with shock.

The reporter, through chattering teeth went on, ‘The householder is, at the moment, being questioned at police headquarters, but no arrest has as yet been made.’

‘But it will,’ Billy said. ‘Suck on *that*, Witch-Bitch.’

‘By a strange co-incidence,’ the reporter continued, ‘two ongoing police investigations have collided in this innocent-looking house. In a bizarre turn of events, it seems that Baby C, the child found dead in the small hours of yesterday morning, was in residence here, at least for a short time. The following footage was shot by a neighbour during an incident involving the owner of this house, the police, Baby C and Baby C’s legal guardian. Some of the faces have been pixelated out because both cases are being treated as *sub judice*.’

So we watched pixelated Cherry dragging Connor out of her house by the straps of the dungarees donated by Gamma Dora and Mama Misha. We watched screaming Connor become hysterical when confronted by his grandma Cropper. Her face was disguised but her bosom was not. We watched Connor bite one police officer on the hand and another on the knee while a studio commentator intoned, ‘Some viewers might find these images disturbing, but important questions must be asked about police handling of what was clearly an extremely troubled young child. People are asking if there is any link between the death of Baby C and the discovery of a body concealed under the foundations of a suburban garden shed. Over to you, Meredith, at the scene.’

‘Too right there’s a link,’ Billy said. ‘Witch-Bitch. I knew she done for Steve’s little boy, and now...’

‘That was a full-sized body bag,’ Pierre said.

‘Do they do body bags in small, medium and large?’ Li’l Missy twisted to face Alicia.

Alicia said. ‘I don’t know anything about the coroner’s body bags.’

On the TV screen, Meredith knew nothing and was saying so at length. The camera swung round, and among the tight knot of shivering neighbours the first person I recognised was Ziggy’s mum filming the cameraman who was filming her. Then Meredith managed to snag a senior cop who said, ‘I have no further information at present. It’s much too early in the investigation to speculate as to whether or not there’s anything more than co-incidence to link two cases. All I can say is that when certain information came to police attention our response was swift and effective.’

‘Swift, my arse,’ Billy sneered. ‘I told ’em what’s what days ago. And so did everyone else.’

‘You have the owner of this house in custody as we speak,’ Meredith prompted.

‘An individual is voluntarily assisting the police with their enquiries. And rest assured, in-depth statements will be taken from everyone involved.’

‘Oh crap,’ Pierre muttered.

‘Yeah, right, darkie-boy,’ Billy said. ‘You were living with Witch-Bitch. You got questions to answer all right.’

Li’l Missy got up and went to stand next to Pierre. She looked frightened but didn’t say anything. The rest of us just stared.

‘Hah!’ the Devil shouted triumphantly. ‘Silence is consent. You know that, don’t you?’

‘It’s the way I brought her up,’ my mother explained. ‘Never confront anything unpleasant. Brush it under the carpet. Pretend it never happened.’

‘Silence is golden and secrets fester in the dark,’ the King of Crawling Things replied gleefully. ‘I win, I win, I win.’

Meanwhile, Meredith was saying, ‘Does that mean you’ll be investigating the nuns who abducted Baby C in the first place?’

The senior cop looked as if he wanted to say ‘What nuns?’ But instead he answered smoothly, ‘Everyone with any relevant information whatsoever will be located and interviewed.’

‘Out!’ yelled Billy suddenly. ‘I want you all out of my house. I know you lot were the effing nuns. I’m not running a doss house for criminals and the dregs of society.’

‘He’s too gross to run at all,’ Li’l Missy whispered.

‘What?’

‘Nothing.’ Li’l Missy was brave enough to speak but not brave enough to be

heard.

Meredith, unaware, went on, 'So there you have it – what secrets are concealed behind an ordinary front door in an ordinary neighbourhood near you? Who can tell – but we'll keep you posted here, out and about, on Eye On London.'

I said, 'It's us – we're concealed behind the door. We aren't just watching the actions on TV. We *are* the action. *We're* the nuns with "relevant information", and we're in dangerous proximity to the police web. The spider cops are just waiting to wrap us up, suffocate us and suck out our blood and guts.'

'Who gave *you* permission to bring your lunatic ravings back into my house?' Billy, diverted from the screen, turned on me. The air was thick with flying splinters.

'P'raps you want a beer?' Tantie suggested helpfully.

'Lady B's right,' Alicia said to Pierre. 'This isn't the right place for you to stay.'

'All I got to do is open my window and tell them who's here.' Billy's voice had a nasty edge to it. He was enjoying himself, feeling powerful. I could smell it.

'Beer and a *soupçon* more of *crème brûlée*?'

'All right,' Billy said grudgingly. 'But the rest of you got to shove off. Now! If you're still here in an hour I'll... '

'We're going,' Alicia said quietly.

'Not you,' Billy said, nastily pleased to hold the fate of other people in his hands. 'You got to listen to my chest.'

'Not so fast,' she said. 'Billy, you can't expect me to help you for free while you threaten my friends.'

'It's your sodding job.'

'No, it isn't,' she said firmly. 'This is my free time. I'm here as a friend, not as an emergency ambulance call-out. Treat me as a friend. Treat my friends as friends. And remember that I am a woman of colour. When you insult Pierre you insult me too. And when you demean women you demean me too. Shape up and show some respect. I can help you or I can kick your arse. Your choice.'

Billy stared at her with his mouth open. So did Pierre. Tantie punched the air. What I felt was nausea. It was as good a lesson as I'd ever been given about standing up for yourself and what you believe. It was what I should have said and done if I hadn't been too weak, too scared. I'd never tackled Billy about racism, sexism or ageism and my ancient cowardice shamed me.

'It's my house,' Billy said, deflating. And to my horror I saw a trickle of tears begin to ooze out of his tiny eyes. 'I'm a sick man. I can't help it.'

‘Yes,’ Alicia agreed. ‘It is your house, and you aren’t well. But, Billy, you’re not a child – you *can* help it.’

‘I’m sorry,’ he said, so brokenly he could scarcely be heard.

Why isn’t victory a pleasure? Leaving Alicia to look after her patient, the rest of us slunk out of the room as if we’d been caught bullying a puppy. Tantie recovered by the time she reached the bottom of the stairs. ‘Pah!’ she said. ‘The man is a pig. But I will stay. It is practical.’

‘Not for us,’ Li’l Missy said. ‘We got to get out.’ I noticed that his hands were shaking. ‘How do we get out without anyone seeing us?’

‘Same way we got in,’ Pierre said, ‘fast, careful and lucky.’

My heart sank. I was none of those things.

‘Meanwhile, pack up double-quick.’ Pierre looked at me. ‘You still think Alicia’s just another shag for me?’ he asked.

‘Maybe you got lucky this time,’ I said. ‘It doesn’t mean your judgement’s any better. Did you pick her for her warmth, courage and noble spirit, Pierre? Or because Satan pointed you to her generous mouth and arse? For true, now?’

Pierre’s eyes slid past me, and he said to Li’l Missy, ‘We should ring Kaylee Yost.’

‘I can’t go to the lockup,’ Missy said.

‘No, you can’t.’ He stared at her and she stared back. It was as if the implications of accepting free lodging next door to the Devil’s Dangerous Daughter were finally penetrating their thick skulls. And they call *me* stupid.

Pierre keyed Kaylee’s number while Li’l Missy began to collect his possessions. I opened the front door a crack and peeked out. A single cop stood guard over Cherry’s front door. The neighbours had retreated into the warmth of their homes. I went to Billy’s back door. The lights in Cherry’s garden were as bright as ever. There were still the sounds of concentrated activity – digging, sifting and lifting. What else were they expecting to find?

Cherry was in the spider’s web – exactly where she’d wanted to put me.

‘Satisfied?’ asked my mother. ‘A nicely turned out, well-presented young woman with a good job, who is always neat and clean and who never uses foul language, is having her reputation sullied. All because you had to interfere with things that didn’t concern you.’

‘Kerrilla Cropper was a mate,’ I said.

‘Lies, lies, lies,’ said Satan. ‘You wouldn’t give a dry fart on a wet night for her. You only went to Shoreditch because my Cherry persuaded Pierre to dose you with Antabuse and you couldn’t get hammered. There was no righteous reason.’

I buried my head in my hands. ‘Just for one moment,’ I pleaded, ‘shut the fuck up.’ But even with my fingers in my ears his crazy laughter rang like

tinnitus.

Electra pushed through the kitchen door and relieved herself on Billy's ragged grass. Tantie came out after her with two small glasses of wine. She said, 'Come in now. *Calme-toi*. Okay?' She handed me one small glass and held the door open for me to follow her. I took a large gulp.

'Don't waste your time on blame,' Electra said after a couple of minutes. 'It won't help.' I could hear her. The terror loosened its grip. In the heat of the kitchen the shakes went away and I could hold the glass in one hand without spilling it. My next mouthful, while not a ladylike sip, wasn't an uncontrolled gulp.

'Okay?' Tantie repeated.

'Okay. Thank you.'

'*À ta santé*,' She raised her glass to me as if I were simply a social drinker like her.

'Cheers,' I said back. I could begin to think again. I finished my wine and then bundled myself up against the cold and, leaving Electra in Tantie's care, I crept out to find a supermarket trolley.

34

Leaving Billy

Li'l Missy and Alicia left together. Li'l Missy was wearing Alicia's paramedic bib and carrying her medical bag. They drove away in Alicia's little white Kia. No one took any notice. The neighbours might have been watching from behind their curtains but no one called the cops.

Pierre, being a small giant, was more of a problem. I found a bedspread which I tied, sarong style, around his waist over baggy track bottoms. We piled as many badly matched garments as he could possibly wear over the top. I made him put on the one glamour wig Li'l Missy had managed to save from Chill Cherry's vengeful hands. And I made him pull a beanie over the top of it. He hated that.

'Do I got to?' he asked. 'Was that really a body next door? And what's it got to do with *me*?'

'You heard the cop,' I said, winding the beautiful African scarf inside out, three times round his neck so it looked like a dirty piece of rope.

'Well, maybe it *is* a little dead dude. But this is Britain – could be a Roman remain.'

'I don't think the Romans buried their dead infants under garden sheds.' I stood back and stared at him. He looked like dog vomit. He looked like me. And he couldn't help himself – he began to inhabit the clothes and invent himself as a homeless woman.

Tantie opened the door. She stopped, and then burst out laughing.

'Thanks a whole bunch,' Pierre muttered. 'So I've mastered the look. Now all I have to do is to get down on the patter.'

'That takes a lifetime,' I said. 'For fuck's sake – we're only going as far as the car.'

'Disguise begins in the head,' he told me reprovingly. 'What do I got to do

to get into yours?’

Tantie had an unexpected sense of humour – wordlessly, she handed him half a bottle of wine.

‘Now, I fight you for it,’ I said, snatching it away. ‘The Devil makes us so desperate that we start yelling, Billy calls the cops, we get nicked and chucked in chokey. That’d be a good start.’

We began to pile the rest of his and Li’l Missy’s bags haphazardly onto the supermarket trolley.

I went on, ‘Your back hurts. You’ve been moved on, over and over again, so you’ve been walking for hours in shoes that don’t fit. Your socks are wet cos the shoes leak. It’s dark. You’re tired but you’re too scared to lie down and sleep. Everything you own is in that trolley. It looks like crud to normal people but it’s all you got. And you know that however cruddy and little it is, someone will steal it off you. Someone just like yourself. Or someone quite unlike yourself might douse it with lighter fluid and set fire to it. The Devil’s children come in all shapes and sizes. Trust no one.’

‘Shit,’ Pierre said, not looking at me.

‘Exactly. Is that enough information?’

He didn’t answer but tore open a couple of bin liners to protect his possessions from view or a possible downpour.

‘Now you’re getting it,’ I said. I woke Electra up and put her two coats on her. She licked my nose.

Tantie went to the front door. When she gave us the all-clear, Pierre and I sidled out into the night. Neither of us said goodbye to Billy, but we both hugged Tantie. ‘*Bon voyage*,’ she said softly as she closed the door. I was close to tears. After a very rocky beginning she’d turned out to be a good friend.

It was only a couple of hundred yards to the first turning when we’d be off Cherry’s street and relatively safe. Only two hundred yards. A world-class sprinter could cover that distance in twenty seconds. We shuffled along, keeping to the shadows, at a world-class snail’s pace. Pierre was doing well, he pushed the trolley, head down, shoulders up, knees bent, hunched protectively over his possessions. His uncanny ability to assume another identity had made him look smaller, older and very insecure.

‘Think you’re going to get away with this?’ my mother asked. ‘Cheats never prosper and liars will always be found out.’

‘There’ll be hell to pay,’ said the Paymaster.

And at that precise second a police car pulled up beside us. The driver opened his window. ‘Oy!’ he called.

‘Keep moving,’ I muttered to Pierre.

‘My name ain’t “Oy”,’ I said to the cop, over my shoulder, forcing him to

keep pace with us.

‘What’re you doing in this neck of the woods?’ He wasn’t hostile exactly – just asserting his Devil-given right to be a pain in my arse.

I turned away and coughed my plastic teeth into my hand. Then I faced him and mumbled. ‘I was looking for this woman, see.’ It came out as, ‘I wor vooking vor is ooman...’ on a blast of wine-breath. I smiled my ghastly smile at him and his passenger. To my horror, I saw it was the Senior Police Spokesman last seen on Billy’s telly. My hand clenched tightly on Electra’s scarf, but I smiled even more broadly and mangled, ‘How can I help you?’

‘This is not a good area for people like you at this moment in time,’ Junior Cop said, looking to Senior Cop for help, but Senior Cop was gazing loftily through the windscreen.

‘Giss a lip ten?’ I wheedled.

‘Eh?’

‘I think,’ Senior Cop said wearily, still staring straight ahead, ‘I think she said, “Give us a lift then”.’ Which, I suppose, is why the Devil promoted him to his present position – he could understand what was not intended to be understood. It made him dangerous.

‘Yeah,’ I said, showing cracked eagerness, and beginning to reach for the rear door handle.

At last Senior Cop turned to look at me. ‘Keep moving,’ he said in his impeccable accent, almost as suave as he’d seemed when talking to the reporter. ‘Don’t let us catch you in this area again.’

‘Yef fir,’ I said, drooping with disappointment.

Junior Cop accelerated away. I hissed out a lungful of bated breath and popped my teeth back in my mouth.

‘What the fuck were you doing?’ Pierre demanded angrily. ‘You were just begging to be pulled in.’

‘Exactly,’ I said. ‘They never do a sodding thing I ask, do they?’

‘You’re playing with fire,’ he said. And I could see he’d been seriously rattled.

‘You’re in the Devil’s playground now. Fire’s the name of the game.’

He didn’t answer but he picked up the pace, shuffling along much faster than a real bag lady would.

‘Slow down,’ panted the real bag lady. Electra and I had to trot to keep up. But he wouldn’t listen. He even had his car keys in his hand. He didn’t seem to care who saw him now. Like many blokes, I suppose, the closer he was to his car, the safer he felt.

Mistake. The people carrier turned out to be the next problem.

Pierre, sighing with relief, opened the hatchback and started to haul his

bags out of the trolley. I could've told him what would happen next, but I was too out of breath to speak.

He had parked his Vauxhall People Carrier outside a row of small but respectable houses with neat little front gardens. Not unlike Cherry's. His car was similar to the other mid-range clean respectable cars already parked there. It fitted in.

We didn't.

As a bristling red-headed guy told us clearly and loudly, backing up his statement with a cricket bat.

'What the hell d'you think you're doing?' he yelled. 'That's not your car. This ain't where you live. You don't belong here.'

'Right, right and wrong,' Pierre said belligerently. He straightened up, towering above our attacker. He was so fed up that he stepped out of character altogether.

'Be careful, Dave,' said a pregnant woman, popping up from behind the cricket bat. 'She isn't a woman. She's black.'

'I got eyes,' Dave said.

'Then look at my car key,' Pierre said, dangling it in front of Dave's nose. Not his wisest move.

'Who did you mug to get that?' Dave shouted, alarmed. He swung the bat and hit Pierre's hand an almighty whack, sending the key flying.

'Dial 999,' Dave ordered his wife.

'Ow-wow!' Pierre cried, cradling his injured hand.

It was spontaneous combustion. Fear and aggression ignited in thirty seconds flat. The crackling in my ears was the Master of Stereotypical Consequences breaking into wild applause.

'*Stop!*' I shrieked at the top of my voice. '*It's fancy dress. We're going to a costume party. Just stop!*'

The pregnant woman stopped before thumbing the final 9 on her mobile phone. Dave managed to pull out of the blow he'd aimed at Pierre's head.

In my poshest accent I said, 'I understand your confusion, really I do, and I'm sure you're only trying to be a good neighbour, but really, this *is* my son's car. And we're already quite late for a party.'

'Son?' said the pregnant woman.



'Son?' Pierre said. He was driving one-handed. 'I suppose you think I should thank you.'

'It's not what Alicia would've said. Sorry. I'm not Alicia. I'm a coward. It

was just the first thing that came into my head.'

'Well, it's so weird – they bought the costume story, but I really am big and black. I guess you're getting some small idea of what it's like to be me.'

'And I really am a bag lady and a thief. Maybe you're getting some small idea of what it's like to be me.'

'Shut up,' Electra said. 'This incident really hurt him.'

'It hurt me too.'

'Not the same thing,' she said.

'What did you say?' Pierre asked, quite hostile.

'Nothing,' I said. Taking Electra's advice is almost always the right thing to do.

He drove us back to the shelter. His hand was swelling up and obviously giving him a lot of pain. I offered to drive, but all he said was, 'I'm in enough shit already.'

'You need to get that hand X-rayed.'

'I need to get rid of you and go back to Alicia.'

'She'll say the same thing.'

'You don't know diddly what she'll say.'

This was true. He was really out of sorts and hacked off with me. I didn't know what to do about it so I lifted Electra down from the passenger seat, collected my backpack and watched him drive away.

If he'd waited five minutes he'd have had another example of what it was like to be me – Rex wouldn't let me into the shelter. 'You were seen begging, and you've been reported,' he said. 'You know the rules: if you're staying here, you're not allowed to beg. You broke the rules. You're out.'

'There must be some mistake,' I wheedled. 'I haven't been begging. I had to go to Stanmore to see a friend in trouble. But I never begged. I wouldn't. Search me. See if I've got any dosh.'

'You drank it all,' Rex said. 'I can smell it on your breath. You're pissed. Strike two.'

'My friend gave me a glass of wine.' Actually Tantie had given me about a third of a bottle altogether. And it was true I had been begging. I'd needed the fare for the bus up to Holloway, and I'd needed the Dutch courage to talk to Pierre and Li'l Missy about Connor.

But I said, 'This is a false accusation. Someone's telling lies. Who reported me?'

'That's confidential,' Rex said.

'But I've nowhere else to go.'

'You should've thought of that before you broke the rules and started begging and boozing again.' He was implacable.

‘But I wasn’t begging.’

Just then Lorelei opened the office door to hand in the kitchen key. ‘Have a heart, Rex,’ she said. ‘All her gear’s still in her room. No one else has moved in.’

‘Well, all right,’ he said, looking as if it killed him to agree. ‘Just one night, and then she’s out.’ He buzzed me in and let her out at the same time. As we passed each other in the airlock, I said, ‘Thanks,’ and she handed me a small square of card.

As soon as she’d disappeared up the steps to street level Rex said, ‘Get your stuff. You’re out.’

‘But you said...’

‘What I say in front of volunteers and what I say to you is two different things. You *did* break the rules. You *were* seen begging. You’re drunk and a troublemaker. You’ve stayed here too long already. The guys are pissed off cos we bend the regs in favour of women.’

‘Woman,’ I said. ‘I’m the only one here. And what sort of fascist system is this, where you can just kick me out on the word of an anonymous informer, and I’m not allowed to answer the charges?’

‘Juliet House rules are Juliet House rules. I don’t have to explain myself. And stop shouting or I’ll call the cops.’

End of story. I had to push my way through the tattered crowd of men drawn towards the office by the smell of aggression. The guy standing outside my pod was Scots Gary. His eyes were fogged like dry ice but there was a hint of triumph in his thin smile. He hadn’t been staying at the shelter for the last two days. Now he was back.

‘This was supposed to be Hazel’s room,’ I said, the electronic key in my hand. ‘It was you, wasn’t it? You dobbed me in.’

‘She’s gone,’ he said, eyes sharpening with anger. ‘But you’re still here. Where’s the justice in that?’

‘Don’t answer,’ Electra warned. She nudged the hand that held the key and I let us into the pod.

‘I’m sorry,’ I said to her after I’d closed the door.

‘Don’t waste time on “sorry” – just get us out of here.’

First I took everything out of the box drawers under the bunk and put them on top. I took Billy’s coat off and piled layers of clothing on myself. It was still close to freezing outside and ice filled cracks and crannies. I covered my bedroll with polythene and strapped it to the backpack. I was still swamped by Billy’s coat, which I thought would be a good thing in the long run, but it made hefting a bursting backpack onto my shoulders awkward.

Eventually I was ready. I thought about locking the key inside the pod –

just to be petty. But I knew that if I didn't hand it to Rex on my way out he'd frisk me for it. Then he'd find the last remaining inch or two of Tantie's wine I had hidden in the inside pocket of the coat. He'd confiscate it even though I was no longer a resident. Out of spite. Because he could.

The walk of shame along the corridor, between groups of silent men seemed to take forever. But no one tripped me up or added to my troubles. Even though half of them remembered how I'd spoiled the dogfight and were pleased to see me go, they all knew how cold it was outside.

Once I was in the airlock I slapped the key down on the counter in front of Rex. He buzzed me and Electra out. I let the door slam behind me. And that was that.

I dragged myself up the stairs to the street and turned South towards the West End, my home turf. For the first few steps I thought about using Pierre's phone to call him or Li'l Missy for help. Then I examined the card Lorelei had given me and thought about ringing her. But I left the phone where it lay, in my pocket, untouched.

Rex had clearly demonstrated how much charity cost, but for almost the first time since leaving chokey I was alone with Electra, answerable to no one.

As we trudged on, though, the weight of the backpack on my shoulders gradually became Connor. Connor, for once too exhausted to scream at me or bite me, let me carry him to a hospital where I dumped him on strangers. Or tried to. Less than an hour later I dumped him with strangers again. Which led to Fergus dumping him at Cherry's house. Which led directly to... death.

If only the weight on my back actually was Connor, alive and kicking, screaming and biting...

'Dream on, hypocrite,' said the Beast. 'You'd do the same thing all over again.'

'Oh, that's right,' my mother put in. 'Reach for the bottle any time anyone tells you a few home truths. You're too selfish, too egocentric to save anyone but yourself.'

'Shut up,' I mumbled through the last mouthful of wine.

We plodded steadily through a glass wall of cold air. Bent forwards, I let the weight on my back push me on as if I was falling. I used to walk like this for hours on end, Electra padding beside me. I find it soothing – the rhythm of footsteps shuts out my circular saw thoughts. But that night, oh, it was so cold and Connor weighed so heavily on my shoulders.

By the time we reached the corner of Tottenham Court Road and Oxford Street I noticed that Electra was limping. 'Not far to go now,' I said to hearten her because her head was down. But she didn't answer, and we ploughed on.

I heard a church clock strike two before we arrived in St Martin's Lane and

one of my favourite refuges in the deep doorway under the awning of Duke of York's Theatre. It was a good place – there was shelter from wind and rain, and the theatre staff kept the pavement outside relatively clean. Often there was competition for a berth there, and sometimes fights broke out, which of course the strongest men won. But tonight I was alone. I guessed that the shelter at St Martin in the Fields, hardly a stone's throw away, would be crammed because of the cold.

I shed my backpack, spread a layer of polythene on the ground, laid out my bed roll with the sleeping bag on top. I was shivering but almost happy. I could make my bed in one of my favourite places in all of London. My bedding was dry. I was alone with my best friend. There was no wall three inches from my face, and no door shutting me in. I could breathe.

I opened Billy's huge coat and Electra snuggled in beside me. I covered us both with the quilted bag and an extra layer of polythene. My head rested on my backpack. We were asleep almost immediately.

35

Paranoia In Trafalgar Square

I woke up with an urgent need to pee. Sometimes I wish I were a dog. In that respect, Electra can look after herself so much more easily than I can. Decency laws apply only to human beings.

I packed up quickly and we raced to Charing Cross Station to use the loos and have a quick wash. Hoards of commuters were pouring into London, like shoals of fish into a net. Commuters don't have the time or energy for me. It's easier by far, and more lucrative, to ask for spare change from the people waiting to leave. Even so it took us nearly an hour to raise enough bunce for a cup of tea and a burger. Electra ate the patty. I ate the bun.

It took even longer for me to feel my toes. The night had been so cold that my feet had almost frozen solid. I looked at Electra and she looked at me. I noticed the flecks of grey around her muzzle. Her golden eyes were full of hope and expectation but she was stiff and still limping. The night before last we'd slept side by side in a cocoon. We couldn't breathe, but we were warm. We weren't welcome, but there was cereal and hot tea for me, a can of dogfood for her.

I looked at my own swollen hands – I had already lost the gloves Lorelei gave me. My hands were splotched blue with cold and my fingertips looked bloodless. They were the hands of an old woman. And yet, what with chokey and Juliet House, in the past months I had spent hardly any time sleeping rough.

'I can't even keep track of a pair of gloves,' I told Electra mournfully. 'Can I cope with chaos any more? Can *you*?' She didn't answer. I pulled her ears gently and saw that the tips, which a few years ago had been chocolate brown, were now quite white.

Someone said, 'You're been sitting here long enough. These benches are for

station customers only.’ I looked up and saw a middle-aged man in steel-rimmed spectacles looming over me. His expression said, ‘I don’t want to be the bad guy, but you’re forcing me and I resent you for it.’

I laid my hand on Electra’s head. ‘My dog’s getting too old to move on all the time. And so am I.’

‘Then shouldn’t you find another way of life?’

‘Someone I once knew hid all the other ways of life in his sock drawer,’ I said sadly. Because it was true.

‘Why don’t you leave the poor old bag alone?’ said an aging Goth with died black hair who had been earwigging.

‘Just doing my job.’ The station worker looked even more embarrassed and resentful.

‘Then shouldn’t *you* find another way of life?’ The Goth couldn’t help sounding smug.

‘I was unemployed for three and a half years before I found this one,’ the station worker said. ‘I don’t want to lose it. I got kids.’

I got slowly to my feet. My back had locked up from sitting still, and both men heard my knees crack. Wordlessly they reached in their pockets and gave me their change.

I thanked them politely before Electra and I moved on. I’d be back, of course. As I looked around I saw at least three other people on the scrounge, including a girl who seemed no older than eleven. Which is both dangerous and illegal. I wondered if she was working for someone else. ‘What do you think?’ I asked Electra. ‘It’s hard to compete for a few coins with eleven-year-olds.’ She didn’t answer.

I counted the money. There wasn’t enough even for a small bottle of wine – which was a pity because I needed Electra’s advice.

‘Die young and come to me – that’s my advice.’ Damian Death had woken up early as well.

‘That’s my advice too – although it’s too late for you to die young.’ My mother had to stick her nose in. ‘Go to the Devil. You won’t find me down there for I led a blameless life. I was a truth-teller, I never sinned and I did no harm. Besides, I hate dogs – they shed hair all over the soft furnishings. There are no dogs up here, thank god.’

‘Sounds like Hell to me,’ I said. ‘And know what? You sound just like Cherry Righteous.’

‘She’s the daughter I would’ve been proud of.’ My mother sighed. ‘She wouldn’t have broken up my marriage like the dirty child I gave birth to.’

‘She broke up *someone’s* marriage. Remember poor Steve? His son was buried under the shed she imprisoned Electra in. *That’s* the daughter you’d be

proud of?’

‘She’s respectable.’

‘She’s a bourgeois murderer.’

‘Her hands are clean.’ My mother’s words were ambiguous, but her tone did not allow any argument. ‘And she didn’t break up *my* marriage. You did that.’

I pulled my collar up around my ears and let the passing busses drown out her harping, carping voice. The first pinpricks of sleet touched my face. It was far too early for the National Gallery to open, so I could shelter under the portico and look out over Trafalgar Square. I think of Nelson’s Column as the very centre of London. All of life revolves around it.

‘All of life revolves around the phallus,’ said Gogmagog, assuming the form of a double-headed giant. ‘You know that, my girl. It’s why you’re here.’

I took Pierre’s phone out of Billy’s pocket. Pierre wouldn’t want to talk to me. Li’l Missy didn’t wake up till after ten. But Lorelei was an old woman. Old women don’t sleep. I turned on the phone, squinted at Lorelei’s card and slowly, carefully, jabbed in her number with my blue thumbs. She answered on the third ring.

I said, ‘Rex threw me out last night. Electra’s too old to sleep rough any more. I need to find another way of life but I don’t know how.’

‘I’m going to the loo,’ she said. ‘Hang up, but don’t switch off. I’ll ring you back.’ Which was easier said than done for a woman with blue thumbs and an unfamiliar piece of kit in her shaking hands.

But she did ring me back. She said, ‘You probably have messages from everyone you know. Someone posted a video of you, Electra and a lawnmower on YouTube. Now it’s all over Twitter and Facebook. Why didn’t you tell me you were connected to the Baby C case? The police are looking for you. It might be a blessing in disguise that Rex evicted you, because they came to Juliet House for you at dawn this morning. How did they know you were staying with us? Juliet House is in an uproar.’

‘Oh crap!’ I said, when she paused for breath. ‘I’ll end up back in Her Majesty’s slammer. See, that’s why poor Electra found herself chained to the lawnmower. I can’t leave her again. I trusted someone else to look after her while I was away and it nearly killed her. Kerrilla trusted someone else to look after Connor while *she* was away, and look what happened to him.’

‘You’re gabbling,’ she protested. ‘Slow down. Is Connor Baby C?’

‘Yes. I was banged up with his mum. She was worried about him. That’s how I got involved.’

‘And you’re not some rogue paedophilic nun?’

‘No. But...’ I stopped. I couldn’t begin to explain the tangled minds of

cross-dressers to a woman like Lorelei – although she would probably understand and accept it more readily than I did.

‘Okay,’ she said. ‘But there are a lot of conflicting opinions and reactions to you out there on social media. Which may be problematic. But I did want to tell you that you seem to be finding a lot of support from animal rights activists. In fact you would appear to have become a bit of an instant heroine. So, if you’re thinking of changing your life, finding support and becoming less isolated – that might be a way to go. It could get you out of London too. London might be too much of a hot spot for you just now.’

‘I was thinking of going...’

‘Stop! Don’t tell me where you’re going. The police haven’t talked to me yet but they will.’ She was silent for a few seconds. Then she said, ‘I’m too old to understand social media. I’m on Facebook and Twitter because of my grandchildren, but I have absolutely no idea how to make them work for me. But there must be a way to make use of all this sudden popularity and sympathy.’

‘I’m *popular*?’ I was stunned. ‘I’ve never been popular in my whole life.’

‘Well, there’s a little film of you carrying Electra, who is chained to a lawnmower. Your back is breaking. You sit and lie down in the pouring rain to support her, and you shelter her under your coat. You are pleading with a smartly dressed blonde woman to release her. It looks as if everyone is passing the film on to their friends, and thousands of people are saying “Like”. That counts as popular in this spectral world we have swirling around us. It’s all like ectoplasm to me.’

‘It’s Electra they like.’

‘Of course. This is England.’ She paused again.

I didn’t know what to say. I sat with my back to the National Gallery, one arm around Electra’s shoulders, and thought about my private world becoming public. In spite of all the ‘Likes’ it wasn’t good news. I’d been counting on my usual invisibility and anonymity to keep me out of the cops’ sightline. I thought I should hang up and not hear any more, but Lorelei, although old and feeling out of touch, was a thinker. Thinkers were pretty scarce in my world.

Eventually she said, ‘Have you spoken to the police about Baby C?’

‘They have my detailed statement,’ I said, hoping she wouldn’t notice that I hadn’t actually answered the question.

‘Well then, I think you might be justified in leaving town for a few days.’

‘Nobody told me not to.’

‘Which they would have if they seriously thought you were guilty of... What is it you’re accused of?’

‘I haven’t actually been accused of anything yet. Not by the cops.’

‘But?’

‘Probably abduction of Connor, I suppose. I thought it was rescue. But the Devil keeps reminding me that the road to his house is paved with good intentions.’

‘Hah!’ she said. ‘All right, I’ll talk to a tech-savvy grandchild and have a think. A lot of this depends on what the police say to me and what they want to know. You understand? But don’t worry too much – I do know how they work. I was an Appropriate Adult for years. I don’t automatically think they’re fair to, or honest about, the poor and dispossessed.’

It was the most comforting remark she’d made, and I had to be satisfied with knowing she was on my side, up to a point, and thinking creatively about me. Which was more than I could do for myself without a little red wine to help. What I felt most was fear. The cops don’t raid homeless shelters at dawn just for the fun of it. Who told them where I was? Someone I knew dobbed me in.

I took a deep breath and rang Pierre.

‘I’m in the car,’ he said. ‘Hang on while I find somewhere safe to pull over.’

I waited. At least he was talking to me.

‘Tantie just rang,’ he said eventually. ‘Five-O went to Billy’s looking for us last night. Alicia agrees with you – I should take a hike for a while.’

‘They raided the shelter too,’ I told him. ‘But I was gone by then. They don’t know about Alicia?’

‘Nah. But, know it, I got a feeling they’re closing in. And I don’t trust Billy not to rat us out. I’m going to Bristol with Li’l Missy tonight. Alicia, she’s got friends there too. I’m just on my way to pick up my wages now.’

‘Can I come?’ I asked. ‘There’s a big hoo-ha about me and Electra on the Ectoplasm. And I can’t duck under the CCTV cameras any more.’

‘Say what?’

‘Ziggy’s mum – she put video stuff about us on...’

‘Oh, I get it. This just gets better and better. I rang Kaylee last night. She says she’ll work on the immigration shit. She still thinks we’ll be copacetic in the end. But...’ His natural optimism was sounding shakier than usual. ‘She says we’ve given the cops our statements so, if we ain’t been told they want to talk to us again, we’re justified in “taking a break in the country” for a few days. That’s how she put it. And we ain’t been told.’

‘Can I come too?’ I asked again.

He sighed. ‘I guess so. But you got to keep your head down. You go on a rant and start yellin’ about Satan and shit, you’ll pull us all down with you. Hear me?’

‘I hear you,’ I said, shocked. I was close to weeping. They had been

planning to leave without me.

‘Where are you now?’ He was oblivious.

‘Trafalgar Square.’ I stood up suddenly, making Electra jump to her feet as well. Should I have told him where I was? Suppose I was such a liability to my so-called friends that *they* were the ones who’d sent the cops to Juliet House at dawn?

‘Better get a move on,’ said the Prince of Paranoia. ‘You can’t go to Bristol with them. They’ll abandon you. Remember who chained Electra up – no, don’t say it was my daughter. Who actually put the chain around her neck and locked it with two padlocks?’

‘Li’l Missy,’ I admitted. ‘People do horrible things when they need to save their own arses.’

‘Exactly,’ said the Devil.

‘What?’ said Pierre.

‘You can never trust anyone ever again,’ the Suspicious One told me. ‘Trust equals stupidity.’

‘I’ve got to trust someone.’

‘Why?’ my mother asked. ‘Men are treacherous creatures even if they wear dresses.’

‘You’re bibbling again,’ Pierre said. ‘Stop it. Look, I gotta go now. Stay where you are. I’ll talk to Li’l Missy and call you back. Okay?’

‘Okay,’ I said, but I was already walking West, out of Trafalgar Square.

I didn’t stop till we reached the big bookshop on Piccadilly. By then we’d both warmed up a bit and were moving more feely. The shop wasn’t open yet, so we sat down and I put my beanie in a conspicuous position on the ground in front of us. It may be an illusion, but I often feel I do better in bookshop doorways than anywhere else. Maybe books remind people of kindlier times. Maybe those who browse around bookshop windows are thoughtful folk who notice beautiful old dogs.

Trust is for fools. I had been a fool for the last time, I thought. But I sat, like a fool, with Electra waiting for proof of the generosity of strangers. At the same time, contrarily, I was wondering if there was anyone on earth who had never betrayed me. Given a choice between me and their own security, would *anyone* choose me? Given the same choice, I realised, I was just as bad. But someone like me, a rough sleeper, with nothing I couldn’t carry on my back, couldn’t even afford to have principles. Then I thought of Connor and I knew I couldn’t blame anyone for betraying me – I couldn’t even trust myself.

‘I am an oxymoronic moron,’ I told Electra. She was asleep with her head on my thigh and didn’t even open one eye. In spite of all my recent failures she trusted me to watch over her while she slept. And in spite of all *their* recent

failures, I realised that if I wanted to escape from London and give her the chance of a decent old age, I would have to trust that Pierre and Li'l Missy wouldn't do me in to the cops.

After an hour on so, I'd collected enough to feed her a proper breakfast and for me to have a proper conversation with her.

'Know what?' she said, licking her chops happily. 'Why worry about Pierre and Li'l Missy laying traps for you? You might have a tumour killing you right now, and that would take care of all your problems. Or I might. We live, hour by hour, on the wonderful fact that people are often very kind. But not always. Kind and reliable aren't always things. Just be happy for now. It might be all we've got. Let's just walk down to the park. It's ages since I had a good ramble in Hyde Park.'

'Okay,' I said, licking my lips, almost optimistic. 'If you think our twin tumours will let us get that far.' We walked quite slowly on account of her hips, and I hummed, 'Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.' Every time I met her eyes she seemed to be laughing at me.

It was bitterly cold and the wind still gnawed through layers of clothing to my cringing flesh, but the anticipation of tumours had cheered me up no end.

'Will there be parks like this in Bristol?' Electra asked. 'Is there dogfood in cans? Does wine come in screw top bottles?' She picked up the scent of something which took her away from my side and I watched her, snug in her two coats, completely absorbed by whatever invisible information she took from the frosty grass and the bare trees.

We watched Roma women washing in the Serpentine and I knew they must have a pitch and a nest nearby. They are indentured to moneylenders in Romania, and live lives of slavery. I never want to tangle with them – they are very sad but very tough.

Electra waited politely for them to finish before drinking. She was having a good time talking to other dogs. That reminded me of the corgis, who in turn reminded me of Gamma Dora, Mama Misha, Lance and Tony. Strangers, they had done their best for Connor. While I...

'You did your best too,' Electra said coming back to nuzzle my hand, asking for a pat. 'You aren't much good at anything, but that's a different matter.'

'They'll see all that stuff on the Instatube or whatever it is everyone "likes", and they'll see that I saved you, but I let Miss Icy McNasty chuck Connor out of her house and back to his abusers while I watched from Billy's window and said nothing. They'll kill me if they ever find me. Gamma Dora said so, and I believe her.'

'Blame yourself for everything, if it makes you happy,' Electra said lightly.

‘But you’re good with dogs. A lot of people abuse and kill us too. You’re hopeless with kids, and Connor was a nightmare by anyone’s standards.’

‘Yeah, but that wasn’t his fault.’

‘Of course not. But instead of beating yourself up about it why not redeem yourself by sticking to what you’re good at?’

‘You think I need redemption?’

‘Don’t you?’ She kissed me on my frozen nose and jumped down from the bench. Pierre’s phone rang.

36

Going West

I was early. I checked the street. It was hectic with shoppers and travellers, but I couldn't see a cop anywhere. Traffic snarled and crept past. I crossed the road and looked back at the entrance to Kensington High Street Tube station. Two men were sitting on either side of it. One had a cap in front of him, the other a used styrene coffee cup. I'd already had a word with both of them. One came from Croatia, the other from Syria. We couldn't make ourselves understood but we recognised one another. I could see that they resented each other's choice of pitch and were hoping I wouldn't hang around. Further down an Irish junkie was playing something miserable on a recorder. There never used to be so many of us in such a small space.

'Welcome to Albion,' said Mr Nimby. 'There'll always be a place of safety behind our White Cliffs of Dover.'

'Don't even joke,' my mother replied. 'They'll think you mean it.'

'Actually, I do. Wonderfully destabilising – mass migration. Oh, the hatred I can spread.'

'Well, everyone hates Johnny Foreigner.' My mother always ended up agreeing with the One who misuses the most miserable.

On our way to the Odeon we stopped at the supermarket and then we ducked into Holland Park where Electra ate her tea and I had a few sips of the bottle I bought after breakfast. Yes, there is still some left. Of course the one I bought in the supermarket is hidden in my backpack. It's my emergency stash. I don't know where I'll be sleeping tonight.

We stood, half-hidden by the Holland Park gates. I could see up and down the High Street, I could see the entrance to Earls Court Road and I could keep an eye on the road in front of the Odeon Cinema. The park was at our backs. Taking Electra's advice, I'd decided to trust my friends far enough to make an

arrangement with them. Pierre said he'd be in front of the Odeon at half past three. If we were there, ready, he'd take us to Bristol. More cynical counsel told me I'd be a fool not to get there early and check for police presence.

'Paranoia,' murmured Electra. 'I can't believe they've learned nothing. They'd never let us down again. Perhaps they'll come in good faith.'

'If they turn up at all,' I grumbled. There was something so unsettling about realising that Pierre was only as ethical as the woman he was seeing. I understood Li'l Missy better. He was a changling, weak and clinging, like bindweed – he tried as far as he could to associate with people powerful or rich enough to support him. He'd been like that for as long as I'd known him so I wasn't disappointed. But Pierre... he'd asked a couple of times why I was so angry with him. And I still didn't know.

'Yes, you do,' Electra said. 'He failed to protect us from Cherry.'

'I know.'

'No, you don't,' said the Devil. 'That's the easy answer.'

'Why should anyone protect you?' asked Mommy Dearest. 'Who do you protect?'

'You protect me,' Electra said, 'as far as you're able. And you tried to do something about Connor.'

'Too bad you were more interested in trying to protect yourself. You were doing exactly what you've blamed your friends for.' The Devil rubbed his scaly hands in satisfaction.

Just then I saw the Vauxhall People Carrier stuck in the jam about fifty yards from the traffic lights.

'See?' Electra said. 'He's come back for you. He hasn't abandoned you. And if he hasn't abandoned you he won't have betrayed you.'

'Come on,' I said, and we crossed the road between blobs of stationary traffic and waited by the kerbside in front of the Odeon Cinema.

'Maybe we'll spend Christmas in Bristol,' I said. 'Maybe we can start again.'

'Fat chance,' said Mr D.

'Crude but accurate,' said my mother.

Electra looked up at me smiling but puzzled. She's right – it isn't like me to be hopeful. But, in spite of the cold, I had slept better, without Snoozezy's, at the Duke of York's last night. While I was packing up in the morning I'd noticed two empty bottles, three cans, a pair of black man-briefs and a burst red balloon which certainly hadn't been there when we'd settled down for the night.

Since then, random generosity had provided us with burgers, sandwiches, dogfood and wine, plus only a few insults. We'd walked through Hyde Park and Kensington Gardens. Electra was limping, but she'd had a free, grassy,

doggy day and her lovely golden eyes were bright. And, although it was beginning to snow again in a half-hearted way, we'd be able to spend the next few hours in a warm car.



Alicia was in the front seat with Pierre. That was the first surprise. The back of the people carrier was rammed with boxes, and Li'l Missy was complaining of car sickness because she couldn't ride up front. That was no surprise at all. Pierre ignored her. He didn't even seem to mind his splinted left hand. Frightened Dave might have broken two of his fingers, but Pierre was feeling no pain.

He was happy. Alicia had taken a few days off to help him move. Her hand was on his thigh, Motown was on the stereo – what could possibly be better? They kept turning towards each other and smiling.

'Makes you sick, so it does,' Li'l Missy muttered. 'He was never this way with bloody Cherry.'

'I should hope not,' I said. The warmth was making me sleepy. Electra was already curled up by my side. I ran my hand along her brindle flank, touching the muscled and bony landscape of her body. There were a few scabs on her throat and on her neck close to her ears where the chain had rubbed her raw. I'd bathed them at Juliet House and smeared them with antiseptic cream the nurse gave me. She was healing but she was more frail and tired than usual. The trauma had aged her. My heart thumped double-time and my eyelids bounced open.

Trauma had aged me too. My hide was almost as mottled as hers but with bruises. My dislocated shoulder had ached in the cold and it was painful to raise my arm above my head. Recent injuries. But it was the oldest injury that hurt the most. It was the wound Cherry had opened and poured acid into by... How? By just being Cherry. By being my mother. By being righteous. By blaming me for something I didn't know I'd done.

She forced everyone around her to adopt her rules. Everyone had to accommodate her. There was no room in her heart for anyone but herself, no place in her head for any opinion but her own. Even her lover had to conform to her idea of a boyfriend, of what a proper couple should look like. We were satellites, while Cherry was the sun around whom everything else orbited. And when anything went wrong, out came the pointy finger. '*You're to blame. You did wrong. This is your fault. You'll have to pay. Me? I'm innocent, sinned against and never sinning.*'

How could she fail to be the winner, the righteous one when the rules were

her rules?

‘That’s right,’ my mother said. ‘Because my rules are righteous rules. They are righteous because I made them, and I am always righteous. I loved my family. I kept everyone neat and tidy. We had an unsullied reputation in our street. We behaved as a decent family ought. Until you wrecked it, and we became a broken home. Then people looked at us differently. They talked behind our backs. It wasn’t my fault. It was *your* doing. The shame was yours, but I kept your secret. You must keep it too. So now I’ll thank you never to speak of it again.’

‘For fuck’s sake – I was only seven.’

‘And where did you learn to use language like that? Not in my house. No. You’re just an ugly, dirty girl. Dirty, do you hear? And mud always sinks to the bottom. You’ve sunk to your proper level in life.’

‘Mother is always right,’ the Devil sneered. ‘Listen to her.’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Dogs and children can’t be blamed.’

Alicia turned in her seat. ‘Pierre,’ she said, ‘let’s pull into the next service station. Lady B needs a cup of tea.’

‘What she needs is to be tipped out onto the hard shoulder.’ Li’l Missy took my hand and squeezed it hard but not unkindly.

We pulled off the motorway at Chieveley. My brain was jitterbugging to old, old music.

‘Whassup?’ Pierre asked. ‘What’s going on under that woolly cap you’re wearing?’

‘No one ever knows,’ Li’l Missy said. ‘Something sets her off, and off she goes.’ We hurried through gliding sliding doors, away from the North wind into the retail village that was a comfort break for travellers.

The Undertaker was singing, ‘Dance for your daddy, my little lady. Be my baby, baby tonight.’

‘What happened to my father?’ I asked.

‘That’d be telling,’ said the Lord of Dirty Secrets.

‘We don’t know,’ Pierre said.

‘Give me the car keys,’ said Alicia, holding out her hand.

‘Sit down and belt up,’ said Li’l Missy. ‘If you’re quiet, Pierre will buy you a doughnut. Won’t you, Pierre?’

Everyone went away and left me rocking to the diabolical music. A family of four seated nearby got up and moved to a table further off. A security guard came over and looked hard at Electra, but he didn’t approach us.

‘Yeah,’ Cherry said in her bland emotionless voice. ‘What about your darling daddy? Your mother blames you. You blame your mother. But who started it?’

'I don't *know*,' I cried. 'I can't remember.'

'And you blame me,' she went on relentlessly. 'Seems to me you've given the men a very easy ride – if you'll forgive the pun.'

'I love it when women blame themselves,' said Misogyny Man. 'Stir the pot thrice, widdershins, and you women start tearing each other apart.'

'I'm not blaming myself,' Mother-Cherry said in stereo. 'None of it was my fault. She started it.'

'But I can't remember.'

'Can't or won't?' asked the Devil.

'You *never* tried hard enough,' my mother said.

Cherry just pointed her sharp silver-clawed finger.

Pierre set a mug of hot chocolate on the table in front of me. Li'l Missy brought a doughnut and a napkin.

'Where's Alicia?' Pierre asked.

'*I can't remember.*'

Electra whined and leaned close to my knee.

'I'm here,' Alicia said. 'I went back to the car.' She sat down next to me and showed me the bottle of wine I'd bought at Morrison's on Kensington High Street. She poured a little into a styrene cup. I took it in both hands.

'Slowly,' she said. 'Really, really slowly.'

My phone rang. Li'l Missy groped in my pocket for it. I wasn't interested. My hands gripped the cup of wine like a perching bird grips a branch.

'Slowly,' Alicia advised calmly.

'Hello,' Li'l Missy said into the phone. 'No, I'm not Lady B. Who...?'

Gradually, sip by sip, drip by drop, the voices in my head faded.

'Take it easy,' Alicia went on. 'Are you trying to dry out?'

'That'll be the day,' Li'l Missy said, putting the phone down in front of me.

'Hush up.' Pierre drank from his coffee mug. 'She told me she was trying to cut down. But that was a few days ago.'

'It's very hard to do, flying solo,' Alicia told me.

'I guess you must see this sorta thing all the time in your job.'

'Sometimes,' she admitted. 'But if you really want to know, dearest, I was an alcoholic aged thirteen. So I do understand first-hand how much support you need even to cut back.'

That hushed *him* up. He gazed at her.

'You really do know how to pick 'em,' Li'l Missy muttered.

'Yes, I do,' Pierre said, not taking his eyes off Alicia.

'Yes, he does,' I said. 'Now.'

'Yes, he does,' Electra agreed, leaning even closer to me.

'Yeah, okay, you're right.' Li'l Missy blushed and buried her nose in my hot

chocolate. Then he added, 'Momster may be trying to cut down on the booze, but it doesn't alter the fact that she's a card-carrying loony.'

'Sometimes she ain't.' Pierre wasn't looking at anyone but his new love.

'But most of the time I am,' I said, feeling almost peaceful.

'Who was that on the phone?' Alicia asked, lightening the mood.

'Laura Something,' Li'l Missy told her. 'She wanted to know where Momster was going. So I told her, and she said she'd ring again later.'

'Lorelei,' I said.

'Not with the cops?' Pierre looked anxious.

'She's a shelter volunteer,' I said. 'She gave me her gloves, but I lost them.'

'Don't cry,' Pierre said.



It was dusk when we left Chieveley. This time Alicia drove. What with crosswinds, intermittent sleet and Li'l Missy feeling carsick, we made slow progress. Electra and I slept and only woke when a phone rang. I sat up slowly and heard Pierre say, 'It's Cherry.'

'Ping her off,' Li'l Missy said grumpily.

Alicia said nothing. She kept her eyes on the road even though Pierre was gazing questions at her profile. The phone kept ringing. In the end she started to laugh. 'Don't look at me. It's your phone, your ex, your choice.'

Pierre refused the call. Twenty minutes later Cherry texted, and twenty minutes after that she called again. Alicia made no comment and Pierre switched his phone off.

'That's the way to treat the cow,' Li'l Missy said. He gave me a mouthful of wine as Alicia had told him to.

Electra said, 'Is Alicia our pack leader now? Like Cherry was?'

'Oh buggeration.' I leaned forward, tapped Pierre on the shoulder and said, 'When she says calling Cherry back is your choice, she means it. I don't think she wants you to second-guess her.'

Alicia laughed again. 'Didn't you say, way back, that he'd had a crocodile in his head?'

'Yes.'

'She said *what*?'

'You'd be a fool not to placate a crocodile,' I told him. 'But I don't think you need to placate Alicia. If she says it's your call, it isn't a test. Honestly, I don't think she'll drag you under water and feed off your rotting carcass.'

I lay down and went to sleep again.

The next time I woke up, another phone was ringing. This time it was mine

and Li'l Missy answered it.

'It's Lauren Thing again.' He tried to pass the phone to me but all I wanted was another mouthful of wine so Pierre took the call.

I sipped as slowly as I could, trying to make the small amount of peace and warmth last. Li'l Missy gave me a diazepam tab to wash down with the last drops.

Pierre said, 'Wow. No kidding.' And, 'Yeah, that could solve a problem.' And, 'Hang on, I gotta write that down.' And, 'Right. Thanks. I'll get her to ring in the morning.'

He rang off, and just as he was about to pass on the message Li'l Missy's phone rang.

'It's Kaylee Yost, for you,' she said, passing her phone forward to Pierre.

I was weary from neck to knickers and my head felt like it belonged to someone who'd been buried for six months. I drifted off again for a few minutes. When I woke up Pierre was saying, 'She said, foreign nationals are all bricking it right now so an immigration lawyer would cost – shit, I can't even count that high. She said, maybe go to Dublin, and come back as a tourist. Or...' And then he snapped his mouth shut like he was switching off the TV.

'What?' Li'l Missy sat forward.

'Or what?' Alicia asked. They both knew something was up.

Pierre sighed. He twisted in his seat to look at me. 'She asked me to marry her.'

'Told you so.' I couldn't be bothered even to look smug.

'It's just a practical, immigration problem she's trying to solve,' he said, mainly for Alicia's benefit.

'Don't kid yourself,' I said, hating him for making me sit up. 'Better yet, don't kid Kaylee. She doesn't deserve it. Women like you, Pierre – don't punish them for it. Don't *you* become the crocodile.'

'Not gonna,' Pierre said.

'I don't get it,' Li'l Missy said. 'You're in his car and he's driving you to Bristol when he doesn't have to. He's helping you out of kindness. Why are you still on his arse?'

'Because it'd be a waste of time to be on yours. I've got a shot with him.'

'You're trying to make a better man of him, so you are.' Li'l Missy went pink with disbelief.

'I'm trying to protect my baby lawyer, numpty. She's about the only Legal Aid solicitor left in London.'

'Talking about shots,' Pierre said, 'you and Electra might have your last one coming up.'

'What're you going to tell Kaylee?' Alicia asked.

‘What are you talking about – my last shot?’

‘I’m gonna tell Kaylee I want to marry *you*,’ Pierre said to Alicia. The car swerved. And in the stunned silence that followed he said to me, ‘You’ve had a job offer.’

‘I hope you know what you’re doing,’ Li’l Missy said to Pierre, rather huffily. ‘But just in case you do, can I be chief bridesmaid?’

37

How It Ends

Kaylee Yost was warmly and affectionately invited to Pierre and Alicia's wedding. She wore a lavender hat and cried at the ceremony.

Against tradition, all the bridesmaids were friends of Pierre's and Li'l Missy's, while the two best men were Alicia's brothers.

Pierre did not wear a suit. He and Alicia walked on air in funky African robes. But he put a wig on and performed '*Can't Hurry Love*' especially for her. I cried.

Li'l Missy organised everything like a Las Vegas show and for once her sense of theatre was almost totally satisfied. I watched her, gorgeous in cream and primrose, scattering rose petals, and realised that her adoration for shallow surface details couldn't disguise her genuine love for Pierre.

'You're fond of her too,' Electra told me firmly. 'If I can forgive her, you can too – even if it's just for one day. Okay?' She was wearing a scarf made from green and gold sari silk. And I was wearing a green kurta-pyjama suit. Li'l Missy had cut my hair and conditioned it into some sort of submission. She warned me to stay at the back and not to make a show of myself. Pierre stood up and Alicia stood beside him. They toasted everyone in the hall.

This is some of what Alicia said: 'Pierre and I met at a very tough time. There was a tragedy that you've probably all heard about. A child died. We've all got to look after the children – whoever, wherever, they are. And we've all got to look after each other, as Pierre and I are now committed to do. But love isn't just for your partner – it's bigger and wider than that. I feel this very, very strongly today.'

This is some of what Pierre said: 'I'm only here in this country, and not back in Detroit or in the lockup because of Kaylee Yost over there. Stand up, Kaylee, and take a bow. She worked her ass off defending me and Li'l Missy,

and even Lady B at the back there. Five-O never stood a chance with her beside us. There's a trial coming up and it won't be us in the dock. So, thanks, Kaylee.'

Kaylee cried again.

He went on, 'You're all my homies here. I don't know what you think, but I know I kinda lost myself back there for a while. And then, when shit was at its worst, I met this awesome woman here, and see, she reminded me who I am. And, like, I gotta be true to myself before I can be true to her.'

Alicia cried and so did I.

Some time in the late afternoon, when I'd only drunk two small glasses of champagne and Electra and I were dancing together with two very little people, Bow-wow Beverly, the Dog Woman, tapped me on the shoulder and said, 'C'mon, our friends can't feed themselves.' And off we went to find her battered old van that smelled of dog, cat, sheep and donkey, and she drove us to the Bow-wow Bungalow, a strange place built on a hillside nearer to Bath than Bristol.

Beverly was known as Bev Savage in the late '60s and early '70s. She fronted a proto punk band called Be Savage, had scenes with rockers, artists and aristos too numerous to count, got hooked on speedballs, made a notorious porn movie and dropped off everyone's screens. Now she's known locally as Bow-wow Beverly, the Dog Woman, and she's only notorious for having given her bungalow over to abandoned dogs and cats. People think she's crazy, but they trust her to look after every lost dog, tortoise or budgerigar they find. She has a couple of sheds for stables, and an old admirer bought her an adjoining field where she keeps three decrepit donkeys and two ex-race horses.

She used to be beautiful, rich and famous. Now, like Electra and me, she lives off charity.

She and Lorelei were friends in the wild years, so maybe it's no accident that Lorelei is looking for some sort of redemption at Juliet House. Maybe there are women all over the world – some destroyed by fame, some by beauty, some by men, some by weakness, some by their own greed and insecurity – all looking for a better, bigger life to make up for their mistakes.

Speaking of paying for mistakes, here is what I know about what's happening to Cherry Price. The body the cops dug up under her shed belonged to her husband Steve, not his young son. An autopsy found six separate fractures to his skull, any one of which, they say, could have killed him.

She told the cops that he came home from the locked ward and attacked her, forcing her to defend herself.

The hospital said he had been released into the community, no threat to anyone. But they admitted that there was no follow-up.

Steve's old solicitor, now retired, said that while in hospital Steve had begun divorce proceedings against Cherry. But then he stopped replying to letters and the solicitor thought he'd had changed his mind.

Steve's ex-wife said she was so broken up by losing her husband to Cherry and so disappointed that he was too weak even to protect his relationship with his son, that she emigrated to Canada to be near her sister. She said Steve was so totally under Cherry's thumb that she hadn't been at all surprised when neither she nor their son ever heard from him again. She had no intention of returning to England unless it was to help 'put that bitch away where she belongs.'

'I do love angry women,' said the Devil. 'They make all human life miserable, and mine a pleasure.'

'Are you talking about your frozen-faced daughter?' I asked. 'Are you saying Madam Icicle was so angry at the threat of divorce and losing the house that she battered poor Steve to death?'

'Well, well, well. You're still angry enough yourself to believe the worst of my poor daughter.' His laughter was insinuating. 'Where's the benefit of the doubt? Where's the compassion. Can't you even bring yourself to believe that she was attacked by a big, unstable man and had to defend herself?'

'No,' I said, without a moment's hesitation.

'It's possible,' said Electra. 'Give yourself more time.'

'Too late, time's up. You're unforgiving and anti-woman. I've got you pegged. You're one of mine.'

'Ignore him,' Electra said. 'We've got mouths to feed, cages to clean, and all my friends need a walk.'

Yes, I've got my old job back: cleaning up after caged creatures. But animal poop is so much better than human poop. And I am so much more comfortable with animals than with humans.

Last week Bow-wow Bev gave us a new dog. 'Try to socialise him,' she said in her brusque way. 'He'll be up shit creek if you can't.' Meaning, of course, that if an animal can't fit into this weird sanctuary, and is too difficult for adoption, there's nowhere else for him to go. We are the resort of last resort. After this there is only death.

Electra and I call him Max... well, Mad Max. I wanted to call him Connor, but she wouldn't let me.

He came in a sack. Bev and I opened it with care, because we never know what we'll find. This time we found a big beautiful animal who looked like a cross between a husky and a wolf. His muzzle was taped with duct tape as were his legs. He was emaciated. But what made Bev exclaim, 'Oh shit,' in, for her, a hopeless tone of voice, was that one of his eyes had been nearly gouged

out of its socket, and the other was staring at us with such stony hatred that not even Electra could advise us to release him. Clearly Bev had seen that look before. And so had I – on Connor Cropper. We all knew what it meant.

Bev phoned Frieda, our vet. There was no discussion. Frieda injected the dog with a strong sedative and we waited, probably longer than was strictly necessary, before cutting off the duct tape.

Frieda couldn't save the eye. 'It's too late,' she said. 'I don't know how long ago this happened, but it wasn't yesterday.' She examined the other old scars. 'Is this a fighting dog?' she asked. And then, feeling along his ribs and spine, she answered herself, 'Maybe. Probably. But dogs usually don't break other dogs' ribs. I should X-ray, but you mustn't bring this animal to the surgery until he is safe. If he needs more treatment, I will come here.'

She gave him a hefty shot of antibiotics. Flea and worm shots followed, and she recommended we bathe some of his lesser wounds and cut out the blood-matted hair before he woke up. 'Because,' she said, 'You won't be able to go near him or let him run with other dogs for a long time – if ever.' She and Bev left me to it and went off to sample some of Bev's good single malt.

'What do you think?' I asked Electra.

'You've got to try,' she said, sniffing at Mad Max and wrinkling her nose. So I went over him, inch by inch, cleaning his wounds, washing him, smoothing antiseptic cream on gashes and scratches. He was scarred everywhere. His fresh wounds looked about a week old.

I said, 'He lost his last fight.'

'Yes,' Electra agreed. 'And I lost my last race.'

I found the knots and nodules on his spine and ribs which had made Frieda think he'd been kicked. 'Yes, a lot,' I concurred. And I ran my hand down from the base of his tail to its tip. I thought I could detect two breaks. As I touched him, a low warning sound came from the back of his throat. Even deeply asleep his lip curled back showing large dagger-sharp teeth. I stepped back hurriedly.

And yet, in spite of his wounds, he was a beautiful creature with a thick coat of white and several tones of grey. He was well-proportioned and shapely.

'In the prime of life,' Electra pointed out sadly.

'Without this beautiful fur coat, he'd look like Connor,' I said. 'All bones, bruises and scars.'

'Forged in cruelty,' the Devil reminded me, squinting over my shoulder at the sleeping dog. 'Impossible to love, and if you want my opinion, without any long term career prospects.'

'There are no bad dogs,' Electra said. 'Only bad owners.'

'And no bad children,' I agreed. 'It's never the child's fault.'

‘Rubbish,’ put in the unwelcome voice of my mother. ‘You never had a rotten, dirty daughter. How little you know!’

‘Damage comes from damage,’ the Devil said. ‘Generation upon generation of my pleasure went into the making of Connor. And, for that matter, the making of you.’

‘Why don’t you both shut the fuck up?’ I shouted. ‘I’ll give this poor dog a decent life. Just see if I don’t!’

‘Like you did for Connor?’ The Devil giggled slyly. ‘How many times did you desert him? Remind me.’

I ignored him. I ran my hands over Max’s entire body so that my scent would cling to his fur. Then I ran my hands over my clothes so that his scent clung to me.

‘Not a bad idea,’ Electra commented. ‘But I’m not sure I like it.’

‘Try to get used to it, please,’ I said. ‘I can’t do this without you. I need you.’

She sighed. ‘Everything you’ve learned about humanity, you’ve learned from a dog.’

We sat together in Max’s small pen and I put my arms around Electra, holding her close. I said, ‘And everything I’ve learned about cruelty I’ve learned from humans.’

‘That’s not true,’ she said. ‘You’re just being cute with words. Your Devil’s right about one thing.’ She got up and went over to Mad Max, sniffing him carefully. ‘Yes, damage comes from damage. And if that’s true of Connor, Max and even you, it must be true of Cherry too. When are you going to give *her* a little understanding?’

‘Never!’ I yelled. And then I heard a very strange, unique sound in my head. I can’t be sure, but it might have been Electra and the Devil both laughing at the same thing, at the same time. That never happens.

I disregarded them both, and instead took a sustaining mouthful of wine from the flask I keep in an inside pocket. I put a small amount of dogfood in a stainless steel bowl and water in another, placing them within Max’s reach. Then I covered him with a blanket. I locked his pen carefully and wondered if I should wait close by until he woke up, or if I should let him wake up and get used to his monocular vision by himself. He’d feel safer on his own, I thought. But if I was going to convince him eventually that it was safe *not* to be alone, maybe I should start straight away.

He was still unconscious after I’d finished my chores, so Electra and I sat down outside his pen to enjoy the last of the afternoon sun. Electra laid her head in my lap and went to sleep. There were a few mouthfuls of wine left in my flask. I could wait for Max to wake up, or I could cadge a lift to Bath or

Bristol. Maybe I'd find a pitch where Electra and I could sit and watch the world go by. Maybe I'd earn a few quid. I thought, 'Maybe I'll buy half a bottle of red. Or maybe I won't.' Did you hear that? *Maybe I won't*. Maybe I'll take the kindness and generosity of strangers back home with me and give it to Bow-wow Beverly the Dog Woman. Or maybe I'll stay here and wait to see how much Max hates me. One thing's for sure, I won't let him bite me the way Connor bit me. And I won't abandon him the way I abandoned Connor. Electra and I would find a solution. Together.

There are choices. And I'm free to choose. Amazing, isn't it?

Okay, maybe I'm not big enough to forgive Cherry. And I haven't forgiven myself either. But, I don't have to be perfect, do I? I don't belong in the real world. Either I am a stone in your shoe or a ghost in your machine. The only weapon in my armoury is guilt. Give me money and I'll go away forgiving you for having more than me. And then you can forget me. It's allowed. Until the next time.

About The Author

LIZA CODY is the award-winning author of many novels and short stories. Her Anna Lee series introduced the professional female private detective to British mystery fiction. It was adapted for television and broadcast in the UK and US. Cody's ground-breaking Bucket Nut Trilogy featured professional wrestler, Eva Wylie. Other novels include Rift, Gimme More, Ballad of a Dead Nobody, Miss Terry and Lady Bag. Her novels have been widely translated.

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Liza Cody was born in London and most of her work is set there. Her career before she began writing was mostly in the visual arts. Currently she lives in Bath. Her informative website can be found at www.LizaCody.com which includes her occasional blog. You can also follow LizaCody on twitter.